



# IRREANTUM

• VOLUME 10, NUMBER 1 (2008)



# IRREANTUM

VOLUME 10, NUMBER 2 (2008)

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## Irreantum

And we beheld the sea, which we called Irreantum,  
which, being interpreted, is many waters.  
—1 Nephi 17:5

*Irreantum* is a refereed journal published twice annually (Fall/Winter, Spring/Summer) by the Association for Mormon Letters.

We seek to define the parameters of Mormon literature broadly, acknowledging a growing body of diverse work that reflects the increasing diversity of Mormon experience. We wish to publish the highest quality of writing, both creative and critical.

We welcome unsolicited submissions of poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and plays that address the Mormon experience either directly or by implication. We also welcome submissions of critical essays that address such works, in addition to popular and nonprint media (such as film, folklore, theatre, juvenile fiction, speculative fiction, letters, diaries, sermons). Critical essays may also address Mormon literature in more general terms, especially in its regional, ethnic, religious, thematic, and genre-related configurations. We seek submissions of photos that can be printed in black and white. We welcome letters and comments.

### SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS

Please send letters and submissions to [submissions@irreantum.org](mailto:submissions@irreantum.org). If you do not have email access, mail your text on a CD to Irreantum, c/o AML, PO Box 970874, Orem, UT 84097-0874. Submissions on paper are discouraged.

## From the Editor

I find myself unhinged from time too often; for example, this issue was to have come out before last year's double issue. So I have some history to catch up with. First, thanks so much to Valerie Holladay for our time together editing *Irreantum*, and second, welcome back to Angela Hallstrom as the new co-editor. And I have some future to prepare for: As I approach my demanding tenure-review year, I'll be stepping away from the journal.

You'll note that Angela's story "Faithful" appears in this issue. We accepted her story for publication long before she rejoined us as co-editor; we don't self-publish, which, even though you may not have noticed or cared about, is important to me. But you do need to notice her novel, *Bound on Earth*, of which "Faithful" is an extract. You ought to get the novel and read it. The book is among the finest of our culture's literary art. Lyrically crafted prose. A fine contemporary voice, gravitationally centered in the Atonement. *Bound on Earth* is attentive and deft in finding beauty in the joy and sorrow and unrelenting paradox of life. And the novel is wise and restrained in not depriving its characters of agency by reducing the complexity of human existence to a platitude. Angela is as astute an editor as she is an artist. We are fortunate.

I am just as pleased with *all* the stories in this journal as I am with "Faithful." What voices await you. What characters.

And I hope you'll look forward to a conversation in critical theory with a dear friend and teacher, Bruce Jorgensen. And to the poetry of another old friend, Donnell Hunter, whose work Leslie Norris used to read to a generation of us in creative writing class. And to several wonderful new voices. I think you'll be pleased.

I learned something last year from one of these new voices, a creative writing student of mine, Joyce Jordan, whose poem "Blunt Force Trauma" is in this journal. I saw how high the stakes can be—how harrowing the journey toward a poem can be. I saw how much courage it takes to drink from the cup of trembling and how heart-breaking Kurosawa's rule, "To be an artist means never to avert one's eyes." I saw how you can receive grace when you don't avert your eyes, and through grace, catastrophe transforms into tragedy and out of tragedy flows catharsis, healing. Atonement.

So here is a collection of writer's writers. The folks we steal from, not the folks we plagiarize. It is all poetry, the music of their voices. And it is all story, their characters' human arc of endeavor toward atonement.

—Scott Hatch



## The Earth Has Stretch Marks

NICOLE VOGL

She's been carrying the weight of her babies  
for so long. So long and she can't rest; she would fall.  
And she can't fall because if she falls,  
she doesn't hit a ground.  
The universe can't catch her.  
She'd fall and fall and fall  
until maybe crashing into a star  
or colliding with another planet.  
Another planet who is also pregnant  
and ready to give birth to  
mountains and continents and islands.  
So she'll stay in orbit with her lover the sun,  
and they'll dance—spinning so much  
that Earth's dress of oceans will wave,  
and she's so in love, it won't stop waving.

# The Story of Wolf

DONNELL HUNTER

One night, no moon on campus, Wolf found the back door of the Science Building locked, left his track

printed on glass. Next morning no one dared wipe the mud away until they'd taken

measurements, pictures, a micro-carbon-fourteen-Geiger-specter-graph. "Wolves are

*extinct in Idaho since 1929—we've documented proof!*" "You mean to say you've

*never heard of Time Warp? What about Pilt-down Man or Sasquatch?"* An argument

began. Meanwhile Wolf walked on through drifts, skirted sheep camps to the left into

hills where mice are plentiful. He left rage behind, at night sang to stars. By springtime he found

a mate with soft eyes and deep fur. She hadn't read the latest monograph, didn't

know her existence was made void by high decree. Neither did her pups who spent their lives

in mountains, never once visited our university.

# Long in the Tooth

JOSHUA FOSTER

The Idaho winters are dying. The winds blow less and less each year, and the snow seems to come later, once it has wandered and lost itself on the Canadian prairie or to volatile Midwestern ice storms, and only reaches my mountain valley a few days before Christmas. The mountainous, nine-foot-high, plowed piles of ice from my childhood are now three-foot-gravel-filled humps cornering the driveways. The piles stand as misshapen, bleached sentinels guarding the breezeways and bridges of my dead-end country road.

But before the snow falls, after the potatoes are dug and the barley is stored up in silos that are capped and sealed with caulk, the cold creeps across the hills and settles in for a six-month stretch. The ground, chisel-plowed and duck-footed, is barren and brown. The stubble fields are spotty with golden straw stalks sticking up through swaths of blackened ash, left from the ritualistic fall burnings that recycle nitrogen to the soil. As I return from Tucson, the sagging barbwire fences and huddled houses along the highway, the shelves of snow-capped peaks on the horizon remind me that nothing—not even dying—really ever changes. Sometimes there's snow on the ground, and other times there's just yellowing grass.

The night my wife and I arrive, I pull our luggage into my parents' garage. Heads of animals killed by my father line the unfinished walls—glassy eyes of three trophy elk and a white-tailed buck stare down at me, the racks nailed to bare two-by-sixes that form the carport. Pepper, our four-year-old border collie, stands quickly from her pillow with an irreverent tail wag that shakes her entire body. I can't say that I'm as happy, but I scratch her hard between the ears. Pepper

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Second Prize, 2008 Charlotte and Eugene England Personal Essay Contest

lies back down, satisfied. She's much fatter than when I left, so I make a mental note to discuss it with Abby, my youngest sister. The rest—my four other sisters and me—do much better dictating the rules than complying and often delegate the nitty-gritties down to the more responsible, blondish seventh grader.

The next morning, I leave for a jog down to the local chapel and find Pepper in the garage, growling at another black mutt whose hair is clumpy and stringy like a musk ox's. Later, my mother tells me its name—Cubby—and its owners' name, a new family that lives in the cottonwoods. Charging at the larger, less-fierce dog, Pepper's teeth glisten like rain-gutter icicles. Cubby prances, occasionally breaking for the interior, but Pepper cuts him off and lunges for his muzzle. She's no guard dog, rather a high-strung cow dog that suffers from ADD, opting to roam underneath the apple boughs and catch horseflies instead of participating in herding or pickup-truck riding. Unless Abby, who enjoys that familiar caretaker's bond, was injured, the dog would not defend the family. If someone were to invade, Pepper would greet the intruder with her familiar sideways wag.

What distresses the dogs so much is plopped on Pepper's pillow—a red fox squirrel, frozen solid. I jump, but once I realize the creature is dead, try to pick it up. Pepper flashes a toothy snarl, so I sidestep and jog off into the clear, cold morning, leaving it to them to battle out.

The Mormon chapel, a red brick, two-story country church house with a simple white steeple, sits a mile and a half away. Our little rural community was founded around 1884, when Wilford Woodruff, a prophet, dictated the Wagon Box Prophecy, claiming that the cruel climate would be tempered if Latter-day Saints relocated from Salt Lake to farm the Idaho foothills. The first Mormon bishop in the area was named Clark; the chapel carries his name.

In my youth, it was a strange occurrence to meet someone who wasn't Mormon, someone you didn't see at sacrament meeting or Boy Scouts. In those flat valley hinterlands, the Church is society's mechanism. I remember knowing the specific families that lived in the various slat-board manufactured homes and squatty brick houses that

stood so woefully at the edges of the bare fields. Part of my knowledge came from a hand-crafted pole that stood on the corner of the highway, nailed with peeling planks of wood to direct travelers up or down the roads, names like *Scholes* or *Barnes* branded into the pieces with arrows pointing in the appropriate direction. Sadly, the sign is no longer; a Jefferson County snow plow must have clipped and ended its helpful, yet tacky, existence.

As I run, I think of my friends, the Martinez family, and how I should call them. They live a half-mile east of the church in a faded tan trailer. It sits back behind an irrigation canal and has an elevated, narrow bridge that I've nearly backed off of twice. Old, irregular corrals shaped from throw-away lumber, corrugated tin, and pallets make a shifty feedlot on most of their small property, and shaggy, mismatched cows lull in ankle-deep, soupy mess. Two of my best friends, Victor and Hector, live there. They've been fatherless since last November.

The next day, I sit down with Abby at the kitchen table before she and Malorie, my fifteen-year-old sister, drive into town for school. They're both eating toast smeared with sloppy raspberry jam.

"You know, there's this thing humans do," I tell Abby. "We'll eat as much as is in front of us."

Abby continues to chew, rolls her eyes.

"Certain dogs can't stop eating either. Dad told me you just tear a hole in the dog food bag and let Pepper eat all she wants—you gotta knock that off; she's getting way too fat."

Malorie interjects, spitting jam onto the table, "Oh! My! Gosh! I thought you were talking about Abby!" and laughs sophomorically, as if cheerleaders surround her. Abby nods quietly and bites off more roast. They aren't quite sure what to make of their brother insisting they ration out Kibbles 'n Bits with the acuity of a Weight Watcher, so they leave.

My mother—a short, kind-hearted woman attracted to homeopathic medicine and prone to tear up during made-for-TV movies, extremely sincere, and perpetually giving others the benefit of the

doubt; in short, a saint—enters the kitchen.

"It's not Pepper's fault she's fat," my mother says. "It's the hysterectomy."

This catches me off guard, and I imagine Pepper and Cubby lounging on the ditch bank, Pepper explaining that while she'd love to mother Cubby's pups, it just wasn't going to happen. I wonder if other surgeries as well would be reasonably priced at the South Fork Vet Clinic, maybe a breast reduction to lift Pepper's saggy, indecent mammary glands.

"And it doesn't help that Jack died," she adds. It's never been confirmed, but openly believed, that Jack, our now-deceased golden retriever, had sired the summer litter of Pepper's puppies. Jack was a sort of Don Juan on the dead-end street, and many of his bastard pups still roam there. Along with his natural tendency to impregnate every bitch on the block, Jack liked porcupines—he tried to eat them. This was unhealthy. Undetected quills sank deep into his nose and throat, lodging in his stomach, infecting him. My father had him euthanized and planted him under the maple tree in our front yard.

"We all deal with it differently," I say to my mother. Out the kitchen window, we watch Pepper and Cubby racing in and out of pine trees at breakneck speeds. One catches the other, and they tumble together across the frozen grass.

My friendship with Victor Martinez began the day my mother convinced me to invite him to Boy Scouts. The invitation was frightening enough, since Victor, at six-foot-four and three-hundred-plus pounds, is the largest Latino I've ever seen. The second largest is his younger brother, Hector, who became a friend when I started bumming rides with Victor after football practice. Hector is six inches shorter but brawny as a bull calf.

Victor and Hector's massive shapes were a true anomaly since their father, Lauriano, weighed one-hundred-and-forty pounds. Both he and his wife worked at Idahoan Foods processing hash browns and ran their eighty-acre hay farm on the side. When I stopped in, Lauriano was usually in their shop repairing a rusty tractor or feed

truck—the only man I knew who kept a fifth of honey-colored liquor in the toolbox to pull from as he worked. Mrs. Martinez offered me heaping plates of rice and beans. Victor's younger brothers, Omar and Amador, hovered close enough to laugh at my stories but hid when I looked their way. I won them over by eating a habañero pepper in one bite, a feat that nearly hospitalized me.

Back then, Lauriano had an interesting way of arranging the chicken-pecked, gravelly yard. It seemed as though parking the farm machinery in an orderly fashion or arranging the one-ton, four-by-four-by-eight-foot bales of hay in straight, high stacks were out of the question. It wasn't uncommon to see two or three bales stacked lopsided and tipping in random corners of the yard. Sometimes the maroon Dodge would be pulled in front of the house for an oil change. While the neighbors burned garbage in fifty-gallon oil drums, making sure to keep them out of sight, Lauriano displayed his at the corner of the bridge, sending the acidic fumes of charred corn cobs and chicken bones across the canal, where they settled in gray clouds on the road.

And it seemed that no matter how bad I had it working after school or weekends, the Martinez boys had it ten times worse. Victor nearly wasn't able to play football because Lauriano needed him on the farm, but ultimately his size and skill for the game won out. After practice, however, he jogged to his pickup in his sweaty football pants and drove straight home while the rest of us took our time showering and flipping each other with towels.

The one time I spoke with Lauriano was after my doctor's appointment where I learned that a drastic back surgery could salvage the nerves in my right leg. I went in search of Victor to tell him my last season of high school football was canceled—and my dreams of playing for the New York Jets were crushed. He wasn't home. Hector and Lauriano were fixing fence along the road, so I spilled my sob story to them. Hector said nothing and stretched the barbed wire tight with the rusty fencer. Lauriano, on the other hand, engaged me.

I had always assumed he didn't know English. I stepped closer and elevated my voice, making a ring with my fingers and trying to say

that my lumbar discs had bulged like jelly donuts. At a loss, I gave up.

He said, "Just tell me. I understand. I American too."

The Martinez family was Roman Catholic, but from junior high on, Victor attended Boy Scouts, played on Church basketball teams, and even attended a sacrament meeting every now and again. During potato harvest, he and I worked eighteen-hour days for my father; our only time off was driving to the valley for football practice.

The summer before my senior year, I quit the farm. It was a sunny Friday, and, tired of minimum wage and back-breaking hours, I just didn't go. My father pulled up in his big white Chevy and we yelled at each other until his tires squelched out of the drive. Victor, working at George and Jessie's OK Tire and cutting cabin logs on the weekends, gave me a job. I spent Saturday and Sunday with him, sleeping among tall sagebrush and felling lodge pole pines. He did all the work—hefting the thirty-footers onto a hodge-podge trailer—but paid me more than my dad ever would.

After high school, Victor was recruited to play defensive line at Ricks, an extinct Mormon junior college that required church attendance, regardless of a student's denomination. Victor and I shared our first dorm with four others—Victor was one of only eight non-Mormons on campus. One day after practice, Kendall, another friend from our hometown, reported that a Lutheran kid invited Victor to attend church with him a few towns away. Victor looked around the locker room—massive Mormons, in towels and sweaty, soaked shirts, slowed to listen—and he replied, "Why don't you just come to mine?" He meant his Mormon one.

So even though my friends and I had spent our high school years vandalizing and cursing, we hadn't pushed Victor away from the Church. As is customary, the missionaries came to our apartment and taught Victor the lessons. We pulled our mattresses into the front room and sat cross-legged, scriptures balanced in the oversized crotches of our pajamas, toothpaste ringing our slackened mouths, while Victor learned about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.

On September 18, 2000, Victor was baptized by Greg, our nine-fingered halfback. Although the typical baptism consisted of an audi-



ence of a dozen or so, Victor's crowd filled the chapel—an entire college football squad, coaches, cheerleaders, Rigby High students. But absent were Hector and Lauriano, Omar and Amador.

Freshman year forged us into something different. Victor lost his grandmother, and I sat on his bed as his giant shoulders heaved. Months later, Grandma Melba passed, and Victor watched my own silent shivering. At the end of term, Victor decided to spend the summer as a door-to-door salesman. The rest of us were called to preach the word to heathens in distant lands—I prepared to leave for Indiana that July.

A Jersey kid next door, one of our cohorts, knew he wouldn't be back for two years, so he chained his barely used Diamondback BMX bike underneath the stairwell, hoping it would stay put until he returned. As soon as we dropped him off at the bus, Victor and I threw out the seventh commandment and Rexburg laws and bylaws; with a Leatherman, a screwdriver, and a large rock, we broke the lock and took the bike to Omar and Amador for an early birthday present.

A year into my mission, in a sweaty town named Shelbyville, I received a letter and a photo from Abby, who had turned eight, the typical age at which children born into the Church are baptized. It explained that since I was so far away, Victor had performed her baptism. The photo was stunning—Victor, dressed neck-to-ankle in white, roughly the size of a mattress, with one massive arm reaching down to the shoulder of my fragile young sister, who, also in white, barely crested his knees.

It finally snows a few days before Christmas, and the squirrel disappears. I rise early to clean off the driveway and sidewalks, and Pepper stands watch, following every movement of the plastic shovel and prancing on the cold, naked pavement. She greets me every morning.

But three days before our trip ends, she's not there. The thought doesn't really strike me until I return from my jog to wake up my wife. My mother meets me at the door with the phone in her hand—her eyes are filled with tears: "Dave found Pepper on his lawn—she's been hit."

I think to find a gun—first instinct—but they're all locked up. Instead, my mother drives me to Dave's, a cousin-in-law, who has wrapped Pepper in a blue bathroom towel. When the dog sees the familiar SUV, she rises and coughs red foam.

Dave shows me speckled spots of snow painted with blood and saliva. My mother, late for work, asks that I load Pepper into the backseat of my aunt's Chevy Avalanche and take her to the vet. When I do, Pepper lays her head down on the seat without a whimper.

"Don't let her suffer," my mother says, holding my elbow. "Put her down if you have to."

"She's not mine—don't put that on me." My mother leaves without an answer.

At speeds reckless for the icy roads, I rush into town, passing dilapidated farms, chapels, and the Rigby Pioneer Cemetery. A young, calm veterinarian at South Fork checks Pepper's reflexes, tests her strength, x-rays her chest. Surprisingly, the dog has no broken ribs, ruptured diaphragm, or deflated lungs. As the vet pumps Pepper full of dexamethasone, he explains that she probably just got bonked on the head. He warns that risk, however, remains—if her brain swells, she's as good as gone. He prescribes food and water, a warm place, close monitoring.

The drive home is much slower, almost pleasant. I speak to Pepper in low, hushed tones and think that in some countries, she would be an *entrée*. When I make the left turn into our drive, she lifts up in the backseat, recognizing the yard and garage. Her body begins to wag side to side, and she—in the most innocent, supine way—defecates. I use the towel to clean off the seat and carry her inside.

I had called ahead to Renae, asking her to remove the rugs from the back guest bathroom and to lay down Pepper's pillow. I lower the dog and begin to clean off her backside. Renae says, "You're gonna make a great dad." I mention that there's a good chance that Pepper will soon die no matter how softly I clean her.

Whether it's the motion or the feeling that crowds the half-bath, I remember my uncle Vance, who died several years before from HIV complications. A cocaine addict and homosexual, once he contracted

the virus he drastically limited communications with his eleven siblings and widowed mother. But when the family was informed that Vance's tired body was failing, five of the sisters and my grandmother rushed to Salt Lake for his last hours. Days after the funeral, my mother told me how gratifying it was to be in Vance's house and, along with the other familial matrons, wash, dry, and dress him before he closed his eyes for good.

As Pepper buries her muzzle into a dish of water, draining three bowlfuls in minutes, I remember the day that Victor lost his father. I had ditched my weekend farm obligations to watch a college football game with two friends. It was early November, the coldness having settled in a month previous, still snowless and yellow. When my mother rang my cell phone, I almost didn't answer, assuming it would be some request to assist with the endless cattle vaccinations or welding. But, in her shaky bad-news voice—one I'd heard for my grandmothers, crop disasters, Vance, and pets—she tells me that a hay bale fell on Lauriano Martinez, and that even though the ambulance made it, I needed to come down to comfort the boys.

Only Hector and Omar were at home—the rest in Idaho Falls at the hospital. In the yard, off to the left, I saw the mound of residual hay from the broken bale, a loader tractor parked beside it. A fierce wind blew from the south.

Hector explained that his father and Omar had been feeding and that Lauriano had forgotten something inside and walked back to the house alone. Blustery, bitter, the wind compelled Lauriano to walk next to a three-bale stack. It happened in seconds: the wind blew off the top bale, and it crushed Lauriano. Omar said the *thud* was almost inaudible due to the wind, and he turned from the fence to see the bale rocking to a lopsided stop on top of his father.

Hector, working a shift at the tire store, beat the ambulance. By then, Omar and his mother had cut the six twine strings holding the bale together and ripped off chunks of prickly hay by hand. But the result was unanticipated; instead of allowing more give, the bale peeled and flattened around Lauriano's body. With the loader tractor, they

picked up what they could, and tore Lauriano out from underneath.

Hector related all of this to me in a stoic manner. He shook his head a few times and kicked gravel with the toe of his boot, but other than that he dictated as factually as a police blotter. Unlike Victor, he would not let me see him cry.

That night, three other friends and I visited the hospital. Victor had not yet arrived, so in the waiting room, we watched Omar and Amador squeeze their nose bridges to stanch the tears. Victor's mother cried and cried and in her strained Spanish explained that *intentaron, intentaron, hicieron todo lo possible*. They tried, they tried, they did everything they could.

In the hallway, I grabbed Hector and explained that as Mormon elders, my friends and I could give his father a priesthood blessing, anointing his head with sacred healing oil and blessing his body with peace and comfort. Hector, having lived and worked with Mormons his entire life, having heard us cuss and crack beers, talk about dirty women and skipping Church, declined, saying, "It's okay, man. You know, he was Catholic."

When Victor arrived, he spoke in a hushed voice to the nurse and waved us back to the room. Down the hallway, I told him what Hector had said, and, nodding, his eyes damp and distant, he rocked my shoulder with his massive hand and said nothing. In the room, Lauriano—tubes in his nose and mouth, IVs hanging from an aluminum tree, lines snaking into the skin opposite his elbow—was eggplant purple. His gown had fallen down like a toga, exposing his bruised and swollen chest. His shaved head was also swollen, and hot to the touch. The four of us anointed his broken body with the oil, placing our hands—hands with which we had flipped the bird, unclasped bra straps, and used for a number of ungodly acts—on his hand, avoiding his damaged head, to pronounce a healing blessing. Looking back and forth to Victor and his father, I believed we could save the man. Even though Jesus didn't start until thirty, I expected that we, none older than twenty-three, had faith to work miracles.

After the blessing and another round in the waiting room, we walked quietly out to the parking lot and realized it was snowing.

\* \* \*

Pepper's vomit coats the tile floor. I open the back door to air it out, and the dog stands and hobbles before I catch her. Walking like a newborn fawn, knees unbending, head hanging loosely and waving side to side, she falls down three stairs and finally crawls to her normal corner in the garage.

I shut the doors and plug in a space heater to coax her health back, but it seems that the only thing she wants is water, water, water. Four more bowlfuls lapped up faster than her strength allows. I put on a glove—she's sweating, her fur is clumpy and wet—and pet her until she falls asleep.

At three in the afternoon, Abby and Malorie return. When Malorie demands that Abby open the garage door, Pepper stumbles out, vomiting, and lies down in a snow bank. Abby screams and, before I can explain, shoots downstairs and slams her door. Once Pepper has cooled, I carry her back inside.

Abby, calmed, comes out. Awkwardly, I put my arm around her and, mimicking Hector, explain the situation in an even tone. Sniffling, she gets a dishful of food, takes my glove, and sits down beside Pepper, whispering beautiful things.

Renae and I go to Idaho Falls for last-minute purchases and don't get home until ten. Although the garage door is barracked down, Pepper isn't inside. I ask my father, who's watching the Weather Channel—anticipating a severe cold front—if he's seen her.

"She got out—looked pretty hot," he says.

"I wonder if she was hit," I tell him. "Nothing wrong inside, didn't even bark when I picked her up."

"She was walking good earlier."

"Could someone just have whacked her on the head with a shovel? I mean, she's too smart to get hit by a car."

He sits back. "I haven't seen Henry's dog either, or that black one. Maybe someone poisoned them."

Sadly, this is not uncommon. Since all the neighbors own livestock, packs of dogs cause unneeded stress and death. The favorite local remedy is TNT, or Temik 'n' tuna, concocted by hiding Temik

pellets—an insecticide dispersed over potato plants—into meat and setting the mixture out for the pests; its ingestion causes an agonizing and drawn-out death. My father's diagnosis makes sense, and my family begins to implicate strange neighbors with motives.

That night, I search the backyard, pasture, and canal bank with a Maglite, whistling, calling. After twenty minutes or so, I'm too cold to keep looking—it's below zero. She's gone off somewhere to die alone.

The day after the accident, Hector needed help with the herd, so that Sunday three other locals and I ditched church and lined up pickups and horse trailers to load the ratty calves and transport them to working chutes five miles away. We left the mother cows and bulls, broken teeth and short gums, in the corral. It was a misty, depressing, low-hanging day. I joked with George, the owner of the tire store, about high school sports and other meaningless things. Hector, the new patron of the Martinez herd, directed traffic and loaded the bunches, shouting and chasing with sticks.

At the corrals, we medicated, castrated, and dehorned the calves. They wandered down the alleyway confused and jumpy, looking side-to-side for their familiar hay stacks and milk bags. Then we slammed them into the squeeze chute. The injections—two quick shots in the rump. Castration via a thick green rubber band cinched tight around the scrotum, cutting off the circulation. Their shriveled sacks dropped off in weeks. If they were too mature, we'd cut them out with a pocket knife. Dehorning was done with a tool that looked like an oversized pair of toenail clippers. The sickening crunch—done with a fierce outward handle thrust, supposedly painless—severs a vein that supplies the horn with blood. Once clipped, it continues to pump with the calves' heartbeat and makes them look like undead victims of B-grade horror flicks, crimson fountains spraying and hanging heavy in the mist. When the chute opened, the calves wandered out, shaking their lightened heads, and clumped at the back of the corral.

When we finished, we were covered in blood. Streaks painted the calves' shoulders and foreheads, and it seeped into our tan coats and

leather gloves. By the end, we had stopped joking, knowing how the Martinezes must feel to be separated from life with a *crack*, a *thud*, a residue that coated everything. We shut our mouths and waved as we pulled the empty trailers home.

After the blessing, Lauriano improved but three weeks later was transported to Salt Lake. Nothing could be done. The family removed the life support, and Lauriano expired soon after.

His funeral was held in a crumbling Catholic church in Idaho Falls. Unlike the Mormon services to which I'm accustomed, where the families spend hours telling cute and unlikely stories about the deceased, laughing over ham and scalloped potatoes, the Catholic version required us to kneel and pray, everyone wore black, and most of the congregation wept. I was detoured and missed the funeral procession, ending up back at the Rigby Pioneer Cemetery behind the rest.

On that cold, gray day, the empty maple trees seemed to loom up out of the ground like skeletal hands, carpals and metacarpals, bony knuckles, blackened fingernails. Wet snow coated the ancient headstones, and trails from cars to the gravesite wormed through the slush.

Pepper doesn't return and we mourn the fact we can't bury her. Malorie calls Cubby's owners. He's dead, too; a few days earlier, he crawled into his house and never came out. His paws were covered with chemical burns, his mouth and tongue ruined.

The morning we leave for the airport, I haul wrapping paper and gift boxes behind the shop to burn them. It takes one match to ignite. I stand outside, letting warmth wash over me as I take in the expansive, bleak horizon. I hear a sharp whine, and whistle. A strange bark jumps from behind the apple trees. It's Pepper, trapped underneath a pile of rotten fencing boards. She's chewed at the wood, clawed at the earth—too weak to pull her own body from underneath the stack. I jerk her out by the paws. She stumbles ten yards and collapses.

Carrying her into the garage, rushing into the house, calling my father and mother—I'm elated. As Renae loads our luggage, I shut down the garage and stuff a white pill coated in peanut butter down

Pepper's throat, fancying myself a hero. As we leave I text my sisters: "Found Pepper! Gonna b ok!"

Days later, I talk to my mother, who tells me that the dog is surviving; Abby's giving her meds and making sure she's fed and watered. My mother adds, "I think Pepper's heartbroken without Cubby. All she does is wander out to the driveway, look around, and wander back."

My second day in Idaho, Victor and I had driven to see his family. He stayed in the car on a phone call—still a door-to-door salesman, but pulling down six figures. Hector, Omar, and Amador pitched hay with their backs to me. The yard was immaculate: the hay stacked four-high and in one long, straight row, the trucks and tractors lined up. Doors and windows closed tight. The mangers clean from rotting feed and straw. The shop doors, shut; the fences, tall and taut. No broken bales in sight.

Not used to the cold, I flipped up my hood. Before I left, my hair was long and unkempt; now it was shaved. I wore sunglasses. When they heard me crunching through the straw and turned, they didn't recognize me.

Amador stammered a confused, "Fish?" My high school nickname, Fish, was given by a bully who converted my perfectly shaped earlobes into droopy, detached, nipple-shaped flaps. But when Amador said it, I smiled—instantly I wanted to move back, live in a trailer, throw away my books, and pitch hay.

They were strong and handsome. Amador, seventeen, had a nest of nappy black hair; Omar barely fit in his coveralls. Hector showed me a '73 Mustang and talked Victor into giving him a ride to the auto body shop to retrieve a project truck. In the car, we joked and cussed, Victor punching me in the thigh when I teased him about slaving for The Man; me feigning and jabbing when he claimed he'd marry one of my sisters.

The project—a 1985 Chevy Short Box pickup—was painted a shining cherry red. Although a skeleton of what it would be—lacking windows, door handles, gauges, a radio, the seat not even bolted down



—it was one step closer. Victor paid, and Hector decided to take the truck to the tire store for rims before the snow arrived.

I climbed in the truck with Hector, and he laughed, telling me I'd freeze my ass off. We rolled down the highway. I'd never driven at high speeds without a windshield. The air rushed into the cab. I cinched my hood up; the bridge of my sunglasses froze and dug into my nose. Hector, hands at ten and two, shivered through his thick black work coat. I turned around and screamed an incoherent string of profanity. Behind us, Victor crawled along with his hazard lights flashing. I showed him both my middle fingers.

Hector pushed the truck up to forty-five, and the straining engine combined with the winter air thundered around the cab. Hector looked at me and laughed. I opened my mouth to do the same, but the cold busted through my teeth's enamel, channeling into the nerves of my molars and incisors, grinding into my jawbone, settling into my spine like the dull ache of a smashed thumb. Hector closed his mouth and looked away; I did the same.

By the time we passed the cemetery, the cold steadily wrestled tears out of our stubborn eyes, lines streaking across Hector's temples, the wetness flitting out the absence of a back window. We rumbled toward town without hesitation, giving the implication of such emotions no clout, no time, not even a second glance through the red metal frame where something solid used to be.

Ten days later, from sunny Arizona, I call my mother for an update on Pepper.

"She's dead—froze this morning."

I remember sitting on the garage step, watching my black-gloved hand disappear into Pepper's midnight fur.

My mother laughs a strained, forgiving laugh. "It was so strange—it's been so cold here, last night it dropped to twenty-two below." She chokes up. "I thought I'd bring in the heater, because she hasn't been leaving her pillow, but didn't, just shut the doors."

I think, *How many times can you watch something revive only to expire, breathe only to choke, warm only to freeze?*

"She was on her pillow, just like the squirrel. I bawled for ten minutes," she says.

"Abby?" I ask.

"That's what's funny. I went downstairs to wake her, and,"—my mother laughs through her tears—"I tell her. She sits there quietly for a minute. When I ask her if she's okay, Abby says simply, 'Yeah, Mom, don't worry. I'm through the worst.'"

## Children of Owl

DONNELL HUNTER

When you choose to follow owl  
instead of otter, weasel, fox  
you make darkness your friend.  
Crow is your enemy, winter  
your season, cottonwood  
your tree. The old ones tell you  
this at twelve when you enter  
the *Kiva*, the sweat lodge,  
the *Watgurwa*—house of men.  
They share ancient secrets,  
reach you sacred rites. Silence  
is the ultimate virtue,  
surprise the weapon you keep  
sheathed like talons ready to strike  
when stars reveal the slightest  
movement below. Death must be swift,  
merciful for the unsuspecting  
rabbit, the foraging vole: a tuft  
of fur, a spot of blood left  
beside the perfect cross,  
your track in the snow.

## Blunt Force Trauma

JOYCE JORDAN

Three stark words on sterile paper.  
The coroner's detached cause of death.  
Three words that make me retch.

Two boys out exploring one sunny afternoon,  
cutting through the cemetery, over the train tracks,  
collecting treasures along the way.

Pennies, nickels, dimes, a silver pocket watch,  
each discovery better than the last.  
Then the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

An empty warehouse with no doors or fences,  
no barking dogs or chasing guards.  
A two-ton Sizzorlift.

To them, it is the closest thing to driving a car.  
Climbing in the basket, finding the key,  
cranking it up—like a videogame.

Raising the basket to the rafters gets old fast,  
so they rumble out and down a bumpy ramp.  
A wheel catches in a pothole.

The machine tips like a rattrap snapping shut.  
The basket clips a trash bin, pins them.  
A few inches could have saved them.

As the older boy's broken ribs slice his lung,  
he gasps, turns, sees his friend's head  
hanging over the trash bin by an inch of skin.

Grasping, reaching to pull closer,  
he cradles his friend in the crook of his arm,  
and breathes out—out.

*for Adam*  
1985–1998

## Faithful

ANGELA HALLSTROM

My daughter Beth sits at the kitchen table staring down at her breakfast. I tell her to eat. Eat! She looks brittle and pale, as if her system doesn't have the energy to pump blood from one end of her body to the other. "You're getting too thin," I say, and she shakes her head. I ask her, "Do you want something else? Cereal? Toast? Anything."

Finally she speaks. "No," she whispers. "No, I'm fine."

I made her scrambled eggs and bacon. Hearty foods. I gesture at her plate. "If you eat this you'll feel better." Her eyes are so empty. Food, at least, I can fill her with, and yet she won't let me.

"I want to call Kyle."

I think her body has forgotten how to be hungry. If she doesn't eat now, I'm afraid she never will, not all day long, not tomorrow. Without me here to watch her, maybe she'll never eat again and allow herself to disappear.

"I have to call him," she says. "I'm going to."

I pierce a bit of egg with my fork and hold it to her. "Open your mouth," I say. "Eat this."

"Mom," she tells me. "Enough."

Yesterday, I was the one who answered the phone when Kyle's mother called to tell us he'd been hospitalized. She's a bitter woman who delights in bad news. "He doesn't want to see you. None of you," she said, and her voice was full of triumph. My first thought was that Kyle had attempted suicide. He's never tried it before, but I've read all the literature about bipolar disorder. It's a serious risk and I've been worried about it for months. But no. "He checked himself in," she told me. "He was afraid he'd do himself harm, and he wanted to

get somewhere safe before he did. He's been all alone. You people left him all alone."

You people. I wanted to argue with her but didn't know what to say.

After Beth calls the hospital she comes to me and says they're letting him out.

"How soon?" I ask.

"Three days."

"Three days? How can he be ready to go in three days? How can they do that?"

"It's what they do. It's how they do things." She sighs. The skin around her eyes is swollen from crying. "He won't live with his mother. He can't be alone."

I lean my forehead against my palms.

"He has nowhere to go," she says.

I look at her: my daughter, so young and so old. I can see her spirit shriveling up inside her, curling in on itself like a fallen leaf. I don't know if I can ever forgive him.

"Please," she says. "We have to. He's my husband."

Beth goes with her father to the hospital, but I decide to stay back. "Somebody needs to be here with Stella," I tell them, because after all a psychiatric hospital is no place for a baby. While they're gone, I finish making up my daughter Marnie's old room for Kyle. I fan out a selection of magazines on the nightstand; I fold a stack of towels in the closet; I dust off the blinds and turn them so the light can come in. Light is important, I know. The worst thing people can do when they're depressed is block out the sun.

I hear Stella's voice coming from Beth's room to let me know she's up from her nap. She's the only baby I've ever known who doesn't wake up crying. She wakes up pleasant, babbling her cheerful baby language, happy to wait to be rescued from her crib. I open the door and see she's pulled herself up to stand. She gives me her wide, gummy smile and opens and closes her fist in a gesture of hello. Her grandpa taught her how.

"Hello, Smiley," I say.

She bounces up and down in her crib. Stella is a beautiful child, delightful and easy. She deserves every happiness.

"Daddy's coming," I tell her. "Let's get you ready."

I dress her in a little yellow jumper and sweep her hair to the top of her head and tie it with a ribbon. She's not quite one, but already she's learning her words, like "ball" and "up." She calls Nathan "Papa," short for Grandpa. He seems to be Stella's favorite person, and I don't know what Nathan will do when she and Beth are gone. They've only been living here a little over six months, and already it seems like they've always been with us.

Stella won't know her father. In the four months since Thanksgiving, Kyle has seen his daughter only twice. Both visits with her were awkward and quick, hardly memorable enough to make an impression on a baby. And who knows what state he'll be in now? There's a chance he won't want to interact with her, or with any one of us.

I was surprised he agreed to live here after the difficulties of the last few months. He's been furious at the whole family and with me in particular, holding us responsible for keeping Beth from him and ruining his life. Although we haven't seen him much, he's been in touch, sending all of us rambling and vitriolic letters that detail our many faults and sins against him. He even mailed a couple off to Marnie and Mike in Minnesota, calling Marnie weak-willed and Mike an "arrogant S.O.B. living leechlike off the flesh of the poor." Neither of them were too offended by the letters—after all, they're intelligent people; they understand mental illness and that the real Kyle, the Kyle they used to know, would never have said such things. But in those letters I saw Kyle spiraling even further out of control. I finally used the word I've avoided saying to Beth all this time: divorce. "Walk away," I told her. "Start again. You're still young and beautiful, and there are plenty of good men who'd be thrilled to have you." She went so far as to contact an attorney, but on the day of the appointment, she backed out. She called me from the bank where she works as a teller and let me know.

"I can't do it," she said. "It isn't right. He's sick! If he had cancer or



had an accident and was paralyzed, would you tell me to walk away from him then too?"

"But he's not taking his medicine. He's not trying. He can't be a husband to you or a father to Stella in such a state. He's dangerous and unpredictable, and I'm not going to let him ruin your life."

"He's not dangerous," she shot back. "He's never hurt me. He's never hurt anybody."

"Maybe not physically."

"It's not his fault."

I paused. This is where I find myself struggling. I am sympathetic to depression. I understand. I know that mental illness is biological and often genetic, a disease. But people can *choose* to fight it. I know they can. They can choose to take their medications and go to their therapy sessions and do everything in their power to keep back the demons. Kyle has not demonstrated a willingness to do this.

"Beth." I sighed. "Honey."

"This is not your life, Mom. It's mine," she said, then hung up the phone.

And now he's coming here. To live with us. I plant Stella on my hip and head downstairs. We have a routine, Stella and I: breakfast, playtime, naptime, lunch, more playtime, naptime, and then either Beth or Nathan comes home. Beth is enrolled full-time in dental hygiene school and works twenty hours a week at the bank. We want her to make the most of her opportunities while she's with us, prepare herself for the possibility of a life as a single mother. I don't mind staying home with Stella. I thought I would—heaven knows my memories of mothering little children aren't the fondest—but things are different this time. I'm older, wiser, more patient. And it's much easier to take care of a child when you know that, ultimately, the responsibility for raising her falls to someone else.

I strap Stella in her high chair and mix up a bowl of rice cereal and applesauce. I sit down to feed her and immediately hear the garage door rising. My body stiffens—my heart runs quick—and I take a couple of long deep breaths to steady myself. I already know what I will do: look him in the eye, smile pleasantly, say, "Hello, Kyle, good

to see you," and leave it at that. Short. Sweet. The last time he saw me, he was furious and wanted to argue, to bait me, accusing me of shallow-heartedness (that was the term he used—shallow-hearted—original, descriptive, reminding me of all the things I used to like about him), and I am ashamed to say that he got the better of me and I fought right back, forcing Beth to stand between us as a kind of mute referee while we hurled our accusations across the room at each other. But I've steeled my will this time. I won't give in. No matter what he says, I refuse to fight in front of his daughter. Or mine.

"We're home," Beth calls, coming in from the garage. My back is to them while I spoon cereal into Stella's mouth. I can't bear, yet, to turn around. I hear feet shuffling, the thump of luggage being stacked inside the door.

"I think somebody's excited to see his daughter," Nathan says.

So I turn around. There he is: Kyle. Pale, puffy, heavy-lidded. His hair is cut shorter than I ever remember it being—too short, a sloppy buzz cut—and it makes his head look unwieldy and disproportionate, wobbling slightly atop his shoulders. He was so handsome once. A beautiful boy, smooth-skinned and strong, so vibrant that life seemed to emanate from him in waves, like light, like heat. Now here he stands ravaged. Undone. I prepare myself for whatever he has to say to me.

"Alicia," he says. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He begins to sob, his shoulders shaking, his chest heaving. He drops the duffel bag he's holding, then comes to me with his arms outstretched and wraps them around me. I feel lost inside them, swallowed up. I touch my hand to his back and pat it lightly. "It's okay," I whisper. "Kyle, stop crying; it's okay. We're okay."

He raises his head from where he has buried it in my shoulder and looks at me, his face just inches from mine, and I am frightened by the despair in his eyes. The ragged sorrow. "I never meant," he begins, his voice tremulous. "I want to try . . ."

I step back slowly, gently, disentangling myself from his embrace.

"Don't worry, now," I say. "See Stella? She's been waiting for you."

Beth has Stella in her arms. She comes toward him. Kyle continues to cry, the tears running freely down his cheeks. "She's so beautiful."

He reaches out and touches her face. "The most beautiful girl."

Nathan puts a hand on Kyle's shoulder. "How about we head upstairs? It's been quite a day. You should sleep, get some of your strength back. Okay? That sound okay?"

Kyle nods and lets Nathan lead him up to his room. Beth stands at the foot of the stairs, her back curved just slightly from the weight of Stella in her arms, watching them go.

For the next two days Kyle stays in bed, venturing out only to go to the bathroom. Mostly Beth takes care of him, getting him food and books, dragging the little television from the basement up the stairs and balancing it on top of the dresser so Kyle has a way to pass the time. Tomorrow she goes back to work and school, and so does Nathan. I'll be alone in the house with Stella and Kyle.

"Don't worry, Mom," Beth tells me. We're sitting on the family room floor folding laundry, a load of whites. Beth has marked all her garments with a tiny B on the tag, so I can tell hers from mine. "I can see a difference in him already. The medication's working. He's evening out."

"He'll take the medication himself, right? You don't have to force him?"

"He's taking it. He promises me this time he'll take it no fail, no matter what. I believe him too."

"I'm glad you believe him." I take one of Stella's tiny undershirts and fold it carefully, first lengthwise, then in half. I don't look up from my work. "It's good to be hopeful."

"Please, Mom, just do me a favor."

I lift my head. Beth's gaze is steady. Implacable. She knows what I'm saying. That I don't trust him.

"Give him an inch," she says. "One little inch."

*What do you think I'm doing?* I feel like saying. *He's living in my home! I'm washing his clothes! What do all of you expect from me?*

"I'll make sure he's taken care of, Beth," I say. I fold a pair of Kyle's socks, put them in Beth's basket.

"He can get better." Her face is drawn and thin but fierce, sharp with

the strain of longing. "He's doing it this time. He's trying. He checked himself in, didn't he? Voluntarily. This time is different. We need to have faith."

We need to have faith. Yes. But faith in what? Faith that God will change our lives and make them easier? Or is the more difficult faith required of us, the kind that says no matter the load we're asked to carry, for the love of God we will do our duty and endure? I fear it is the latter.

"I understand about faith," I tell her. "I know."

Monday afternoon, Stella is asleep and I am in the kitchen making rolls. The air smells fresh and yeasty, and the yellow sunlight of almost-spring spilling in through the windows is warm against my skin. I punch down the risen dough, my hands white with flour, and roll it out flat. The silence, the light around me, the smell of sustenance, all of it relaxes me, so when I see Kyle coming down the stairs I am able to be pleasant and calm, as if he's a houseguest who's staying with us for a short, friendly visit.

"Hello there," I say. "You feeling better?"

His smile is quick and glad. He seems surprised at my easiness. "Yes," he says. "A little. A little better every day."

"Good." The dough sticks between my fingers. "Good news."

He comes up beside me in his pajamas and socks, breathing loudly, nervous. "Can I help you? Do something? Old time's sake, you know."

Once, Kyle had been my cooking assistant, my trainee. My daughters weren't much interested in the kitchen, but Kyle was always comfortable here. As the only child of a single mother, cooking was a skill he'd taught himself. I remember him telling me how he experimented with recipes as a kid, trying to make something tasty from the odd bits and ends of ingredients he could find in his almost-empty cupboards. That piece of his history tied him to me. I did the same thing when I was young, making mother-food for myself, lacking a mother who would do it for me. When he and Beth started dating, it was Kyle who joined me in the kitchen on Sundays. I taught him how to make

soups and stews, apple pies, marinades for every kind of meat. Some Sundays, if I was late coming home from church, I'd be greeted by the smell of dinner already under way and find Kyle in the kitchen, grinning, the counter covered with opened cans and spice jars and dirty bowls. He was always an impulsive cook, often working without a recipe, messy and scattershot. I was never able to change that about him. But his meals seemed to turn out every time, I must say, sometimes even better than mine.

"I'm almost done here," I say. I brush my hands together and flour hangs in the air for a moment, like a cloud.

"I could roll them up," he says. "I can't ruin that, can I?"

I haven't even cut them into triangles yet, and already Kyle can tell I'm making crescent rolls. He's helped me enough. He knows.

"Then, sure," I say. "That would be fine."

I allow myself to work in the silence between us, me rolling out and cutting the dough, Kyle wrapping up the pastries into delicate spirals and placing them on the metal sheet. We work quickly together, still. His fingers are fast. I slide the rolls inside the oven. "Thank you," I say. "Many hands make light work."

"I know. Which is why I'm here."

For a moment my anger flashes. Is he trying to tell me that he thinks he's here to help *me*, somehow? Is he still that deluded? But then I look into his plaintive face and understand his meaning. He means to say he's here because he needs all our hands, every hand in the family, if he has any hope of getting well.

"I've made life very difficult. For Beth. For you. For all of you." He sounds quiet but steady, the steadiest I've heard him in months. "I can see why you'd want me out, away, gone. If Beth were my daughter," his voice trails away.

"I love her, is all. I don't want to see her hurt."

"I'm afraid she's hurt already. I'm afraid, no matter what happens now—I go, I stay, I die, I live—she's hurt. I've been trying to figure out a way around it, but there is none."

I sigh. Smart boy. "Yes," I say. "True."

"So what do you want me to do?" He spreads his arms out wide, imploring me. His face is worried and small. "Tell me. Anything. Whatever you tell me to do I will do it."

I remember almost three years ago when we first got the diagnosis. We were all desperate and scared, but ready to fight, ready to win. The first time he went off his meds and relapsed, we rallied around him. "You can do it, Kyle. We're here. Be strong!" And he was, for a time. He seemed so much like his old self that when Beth became pregnant I even allowed myself to be optimistic. But then Stella came and Kyle's crash was so swift, so terrible. I can't get the sight of my daughter out of my head: Beth holding her newborn in her arms and sobbing from fear and exhaustion and confusion and betrayal, her young body limp and drained of hope. I vowed then I would never trust him again. Never again.

"You just do what you need to do, Kyle. Get better. Do your best."

Stella's voice floats down the stairs. She is up from her nap.

"I'd better go get her." I start up the stairs, but then I feel his hand on my wrist, stopping me. I turn and look down at him.

"What," I say.

"Do you still love me?" he whispers. His voice is very small. He is so young, still, not quite twenty-five. A boy. He doesn't look me in the face but at a point just past my shoulder. "You did, before. I know you did."

"Kyle, I . . ." My voice trails away. I hear Stella, rattling against the bars of her crib.

He finds my face, looks at me straight. "It's a yes or no question. Please, just answer it."

I close my eyes and try to find the Kyle I loved. My almost-son. It is easy: in my memory he has taken up residence in corners and rooms and he is lodged there, permanent, his place as sure as if he had been born to it. This boy not of my flesh, not of my blood, but grafted in.

"You know I do," I answer. Then I go and get his child.

\* \* \*

A couple of weeks into Kyle's stay with us, Beth asks if the two of them can move into the master bedroom. Be together. It is not an unprecedented request. The only queen-size bed in the house is our bed, the bed Nathan built for my birthday so long ago. Whenever married couples come and stay, Nathan and I vacate it and sleep singly in one of the girls' rooms. But I am surprised.

"Are you sure?" I ask her. "Is this what you want?"

She is still pale, still drawn, still much too thin. She nods.

"You know what this will mean to him," I say. "That you're coming back. That you're recommitted."

She nods again.

"So you're sure?"

She pulls in a deep breath and holds it. "I've given up on being sure. Is that a terrible thing to admit?"

I circle my arm around her thin shoulders. "Not terrible," I say. "Brave."

She looks up at me. Her eyes are teary, but the lift of her head speaks strength to me, and determination. "I haven't been able to imagine my life without him. I tried to. But I can't."

I rub her arm, and her skin is cold beneath my fingers.

"Can you understand?" she asks.

"You love him," I say. "Of course I understand."

Later that week I wake up in the night thirsty. I slide out of bed and creep into the hall, careful not to wake the baby, and when I pass Kyle and Beth's room I see the door is pushed slightly ajar. They are curled in toward each other, sleeping, their heads almost touching and Beth's arm slung loosely across Kyle's side. Seeing them reminds me how difficult it is for two bodies, even sleeping, to face each other and not turn away. I close the door gently and leave them to themselves.

## Grandma Was Never a Big Woman

CASSIE EDDINGTON

A skilled swimmer.  
But Grandpa flew in Vietnam,  
and spoke at meetings  
like the picture on their dresser.

Four kids don't give you time to paint.  
But cook, bake, measure, stir.  
Yes.

And when I itched in tights  
and fumbled with sticky fingers,  
I fit snugly,  
then little enough for her lap.  
My eyes were level with her  
soft folds of skin,  
massive bread-dough breasts,  
interrupted by a crevasse,  
dark and mysterious as her  
bottled raven hair.

I lived  
at her chest.  
Locketts  
warmed by olive skin  
dangled  
for my opening and closing.



I remember  
a picture of her  
and Aunt Betty  
in those  
old-men swimsuits,  
and I wonder  
how she handled the rocky beaches of the Puget sound,  
before the tree streets,  
her body cutting and blending.  
What those dark waters and overcast skies looked like  
next to her small frame.

## Reading about Sex in Mormon Fiction— If We Can Read

B. W. JORGENSEN

"Ah how hard it is to tell what that wood was, wild, rugged, harsh; the very thought of it renews the fear! It is so bitter that death is hardly more so. But, to treat of the good that I found in it, I will tell of the other things I saw there." That is Charles Singleton's literal prose translation of lines 4–9 of Canto 1 of Dante's *Inferno*. Dante says what I suspect a lot of writers feel about the stories they have to tell: to treat of the good I found, I will tell the other things. And for me the lines express a good deal of my attitude toward literature as a reader. I also like some of what John Ciardi's rather too-free translation in verse adds to Dante's lines: "But since it came to good, I will recount / all that I found revealed there by God's grace."

Brigham Young had a similar attitude of Christian courage and hope in the face of daunting visions of evil, including, it appears, those one might encounter in books. In the Salt Lake Tabernacle on 6 February 1853, just as excavation for the Salt Lake Temple was about to begin, he said:

"Shall I sit down and read the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the Book of Covenants all the time?" says one. Yes, if you please, and when you have done, you may be nothing but a sectarian after all. It is your duty to study to know everything upon the face of the earth, in addition to reading those books. We should study not only good, and its effects upon our race, but evil, and its consequences.

Brigham Young continued,

I intend to know the whole of it, both good and bad. Shall I practise evil? No; neither have I told you to practise it, but to learn by the light of truth every principle there is in existence in the world. [...] Though I mean to learn all that is in heaven, earth,

and hell[, d]o I need to commit iniquity to do it? No. If I were to go into the bowels of hell to find out what is there, that does not make it necessary that I should commit one evil, or blaspheme in any way the name of my Maker. (*Journal of Discourses* 2.93b-94b)

I include those passages in every syllabus I hand out at BYU. I do want students, anyone who's interested, to know where I think I'm coming from when I read and try to discuss literature, ancient to contemporary, Gilgamesh and Homer to Richard Ford and Alice McDermott.

But LDS students and readers of a younger generation than mine have for some time now faced a barrier to the journey both Dante and Brigham Young were willing to take: a warning sign that some of them too freely translate as DO NOT ENTER. It is hardly as dire a warning as the sign over the gate of the Inferno: ABANDON EVERY HOPE, WHO ENTER HERE (*Inf.* 3.9). Its official title is *For the Strength of Youth*, and at least in short (folded-card) form some of its smaller print reads:

Choose uplifting entertainment. Avoid anything that is vulgar, immoral, violent, or pornographic in any way. Commit to keeping God's standards.

Do not use profane, vulgar, or crude language or gestures.

Keep yourself sexually pure. [. . .] Do not participate in talk or activities that arouse sexual feelings.

I cannot take exception to these counsels, though I do confess I am not sure what are "God's standards" in literary matters; if the Bible and Book of Mormon indicate his standards, then he does not "avoid anything that is [. . .] immoral, violent, or pornographic in any way"; and depending on what "vulgar" might mean, I am not sure about that one either (are "piss" and "dung" vulgar? See *Is.* 36:12).

But my real problem is with the way many LDS readers now seem to interpret such counsel or cautions as they choose what and what not to read, and, most critically, how their interpretation affects the ways they read. Some take "in any way" with its most extreme logical force, which makes it difficult to understand how they can read some chapters in the Old Testament or the Book of Mormon that describe

violence, immorality, or sex. Combine that reading of "in any way" with the proscription on viewing R-rated movies (understood to refer mainly to nudity, sex, and certain four-letter words), with a presumption that *any* literary description or implication of sex is *ipso facto* "pornographic," and with an understanding of chastity as absolute purity *from* sex in deed, word, and thought, and you may get some readers who simply cannot read "about sex" in any form at all or read a book that includes sex "in any way" because they would risk contamination by "one little part" (Griffin).

Or you get some readers who think they cannot, which amounts to much the same thing. I recently had a conversation with one of my daughters, a wide and discerning reader of both classic and contemporary novels, about our shared enthusiasm for the fiction of Alice McDermott. I'd read McDermott's most recent novel, *After This* (2006), and ordered it for a senior course on recent American fiction, and my daughter said she'd thought McDermott's previous novel, which I'd not then read, *Child of My Heart* (2002), was "beautiful" (a judgment I could take as likely true and, now that I've read the novel, would strongly endorse). But she also confided that she couldn't recommend it to her book-group because of "the part with the old man": near the end of the novel, its fifteen-year-old protagonist (who as an apparently mature woman narrates the story) chooses to have her first sexual experience with an aging artist whose small daughter she has cared for during the summer. I suspect my daughter is right, that some or most of her book group friends would object to that passage (less than a page) and find it a reason to avoid or dismiss a book that both my daughter and I find much good in. (To be sure, that aging artist could be charged with statutory rape or child sexual abuse.) *Child of My Heart* is a good novel; it is even a good novel about why that girl chose to "make" a kind of "love," clearly illicit, with such an unsuitable partner, though that is only one smaller part of what the novel is about.\*

Almost three decades ago, Orson Scott Card remarked on readers

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\* Update: On 29 April 2009, again talking with my daughter, I learn that *Child of My Heart* has been circulating among some of her book group friends, and at least three

who "do not know how to tell the difference between an evil book and a good book that depicts evil" (77). For some LDS readers *Child of My Heart* would no doubt be an "evil book" because of its protagonist's immoral act (using "immoral" here in a specifically sexual sense). Yet McDermott's narrator Theresa is far less explicit in her account of that experience than the prophet Ezekiel, declaring "the word of the Lord" (23:1), is about the religious infidelities of Jerusalem and Samaria, allegorized as two sisters, Aholah and Aholibah, who "committed whoredoms in Egypt; they committed whoredoms in their youth: there were their breasts pressed, and there they bruised the teats of their virginity" (23:3). (Some dictionaries offer two pronunciations of "teat," a preferred modern one of this otherwise more potentially offensive word, and an older one still used by some farmers and dairymen.) That's the somewhat less explicit "word of the Lord" in Ezekiel 23 (see 23:8–21). (I wish I knew how it should be taken as suggesting what God's literary "standards" might be in regard to the representation of sex; perhaps it's allowed in contexts of condemnation.)

I think we may be in a dark wood about these matters, a *selva selvaggio* indeed, and I'm not sanguine about how much of the underbrush I can cut through or how much of the overstory can be pruned to let in some light.

Here are some premises that I believe are consistent with LDS scriptures and authoritative teachings. First, the body itself is a great good, for "the spirit and the body are the soul of man" (D&C 88:15). Second, and partly for that reason, sex, which "The Family: A Proclamation" calls "gender" and declares to be "an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose," cannot be evil in itself;\* clearly, sex can be used or enacted transgressively,

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or four, so far, have unanimously praised it as a "must read." It's a pleasure to have one's gloomy hunch disproved.

\* By "gender" as a "characteristic of individual [...] identity," the Proclamation might mean only sexual difference; but when it adds "and purpose," it seems also to entail "marriage between a man and a woman" and thus sexual relationship, sexual relations, and the procreation that normally generates a family.

sinfully, but in itself it is not transgressive or sinful; there are sexual sins, but sex is not sin. Third, the LDS doctrine of chastity differs sharply from a traditional or "apostate" Christian doctrine: for some Church fathers (like Origen, Jerome, and Augustine), and for the monastic tradition, chastity meant celibacy, complete abstinence from sex, and sex was condoned in marriage for procreation and for the avoidance of sin; for us, chastity means not total abstinence from sex but the limitation of sex to marriage. Unfortunately, Mormonism, as a "restoration" of the gospel in a late phase of Western Christendom, seems to get its sexual attitudes stained by the traditional deprecation of sex in itself as sinful; and it seems that as a result, our efforts to teach chastity (for the unmarried, to be sure, as complete abstinence) might have the regrettable side-effect of transmitting the attitude that sex itself is unwholesome, contaminating, defiling, dirty, though obviously if it is eternal and godly, it cannot be any of those. If sex in itself is not sin, then neither are thoughts or words or images of it inherently sinful, though obviously these too might be employed transgressively.

I think this view is reflected and implied in the definition of "pornography" posted on lds.org, the Church's official website: "Pornography is any material depicting or describing the human body or sexual conduct in a way that arouses sexual feelings." Justice Potter Stewart is remembered famously to have doubted (in a 1964 Supreme Court case) that he could define pornography, but he did "know it when [he saw] it." The Church's definition *per genus et differentiam* is about as good as we are likely to get. It's vague where it can't help but be, and its last clause, its differentia, acknowledges an unavoidable and indeed essential role for individual "subjective" judgment. Both "depicting" and "describing" seem clear enough, one referring to visual and the other to verbal representations. "The human body" must include not only parts or surfaces often regarded as "sexual" but any part of the body, clothed or not; and "sexual conduct" might include various kisses, embraces, touches, even hand-holding. The qualifying or differentiating phrase, "in a way that," which introduces the clause of subjective judgment, allows that the genus of "material depicting or

describing the human body or sexual conduct" includes non-pornographic materials: this leaves plenty of room for legitimate scientific, educational, artistic, and literary depictions or descriptions. At the same time, "that arouses sexual feelings" puts a burden of self-awareness and judgment on each viewer or reader: does this or that depiction or description arouse *my* sexual feelings? If not, it is not pornographic for me. The phrase "sexual feelings" is unavoidably ambiguous too: if I feel pleasure reading a fictional scene of, say, a long-separated married couple embracing wholeheartedly, like the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope in *Odyssey* 23.231–40—"and she could not let him go from the embrace of her white arms" (240)—shall I regard my pleasure in their (imagined) pleasure as a "sexual feeling"? Or is it strictly a question of whether I myself am "sexually aroused" by such a description? I think the definition leaves it up to each of us to sort this out, in each of our experiences. And that seems right to me: I am taught a "correct principle" and I can—I must—govern myself.

My one misgiving about the Church's quasi-canonical definition of pornography is that it might imply, to any member stained by the ancient disparagement of sex in itself as sin (and that could be every one of us), that to have "sexual feelings" aroused is in itself an evil thing, when surely it is not, unless this occurs transgressively, that is to say, outside of marriage. Does that mean that all "sexual feelings" aroused by anyone or anything other than one's legal and lawful spouse are sinful? It would seem so; and in that case, a great many members of the Church walk some days and dream some nights in a state of sin. (Consider the husband or wife aroused to desire to kiss his or her partner by watching Elizabeth and Darcy kiss in the most recent film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*: a far too simple example.) Alas. In one sentence on lds.org, "It is as harmful to the spirit as tobacco, alcohol, and drugs are to the body," the "It" clearly refers to pornography; but by that point in the paragraph its reference might also have begun to spill over onto "sexual feelings" themselves, which after all are what "it" arouses in the soul and thus what may harm the spirit. It's very difficult to escape the stain of all those centuries of Christian error about sexuality.

But this particular problem need not concern me so much in this context, since I want to focus on literary descriptions of "the human body or sexual conduct" that, in my experience, do not "arouse sexual feelings" in any simple way, if at all. There is a difference, broadly discernible, between pornography and literature (pornography has no characters, just named cutouts or stick figures with names for their parts and activities and sensations); and there is a difference between the pornographic use or reading of literature (to arouse and indulge my sexual feelings) and the literary use or reading of literature (to understand characters and their situations and actions as fully as possible). The same reader of the same text, at different times, may use or read that text in either way: when I read D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* at age seventeen, having heard it was "pornographic," I think I mainly tried to use it pornographically, though in fact the text resisted that use; as I've more recently been re-reading it, I find I'm not inclined to read it pornographically, and that in fact I cannot re-create whatever pornographic effect I might have gotten from it at seventeen. I seem to have become a more complicated reader of a more complicated book than I thought I was reading back in the summer of 1961.

In a 1965 *Harper's* article "Against Pornography," George P. Elliott writes of the "special problem" faced by the realistic novelist "because [realism] aims to present people as they actually are":

How can a realistic artist be true to his subject if he is forbidden direct access to an area of human behavior which is of considerable importance? The aesthetic problem is for the realistic artist to represent these actions in such a way as to lead to understanding of the characters without arousing disgust in them or a prurient interest in their activities. When he can accomplish this very difficult feat, then he is justified in including in a realistic work of art representations that would otherwise be pornographic. (153)

Elliott goes on to summarize very briefly a passage from his friend R. V. Cassill's novel *Pretty Leslie* (1963), then comments:

The reader is not encouraged to use this episode as an incitement to casual fornication or voyeurism. Instead, what is aroused in him is a profound understanding of



the characters themselves, of a kind he could have got in no other way. To understand what these people were like, how they were connected, and why they did what they did to each other, the reader must be close to them as they make love, and because he knows this is necessary for his understanding, he will not use either the episode or the whole novel for pornographic ends, unless he himself is already perverted. [...] [T]he account [...] is not so close as to create disgust but is close enough to lead toward moral understanding and aesthetic satisfaction: there is no other possible way for the novelist to accomplish this legitimate end, and the emphasis he gives the episode is in proportion to its contribution to the whole novel. (154–55)

That is how one mid-twentieth-century American writer, opposed to pornography and austere restrained in his own descriptions of characters making love, discussed the literary use of a description of "the human body or sexual conduct" in fiction.

Here is how I understand reading. As a reader I am a moral agent in what Tolstoy (referring to the author's relation to his subject) called an "independent moral relation" (866) to the story I read; I am free to think and judge and feel and to know myself judged by the judgments I mete out; bound by my free choice to the sentences of the text and my willingness to read them, yes; but also free in that relation. Reading, as Sartre writes, "is a pact of generosity between author and reader" (49). For about ten years now, my guiding figure for the act of reading has been a passage in which Simone Weil, explaining that attention is the substance of both the love of God and the love of the neighbor, reminds us that "it is said that the Grail [. . .] belongs to the first comer who asks the guardian of the vessel, a king three-quarters paralyzed by the most painful wound, 'What are you going through?'" Then she adds, "The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: 'What are you going through?'" (115). To read a story is as if I had asked that question and then awaited, attended, the answer. This is especially obvious if the narration is in first person; if it's in third person, perhaps it's a little more as if I had asked the author or narrator, "What are they going through?" Either way, that is how I understand my "independent moral relation" to the story.

Reading is a lot less like eating (at risk of contamination or poisoning) than it is like listening to my neighbor or to a stranger. It is not a biochemical process (though reading sentences does indeed alter my brain chemistry) but a spiritual act; or, I would prefer to say, an act of the whole soul. Again the existentialist Sartre persuades me to be more Christian as a reader:

[...] reading is an exercise in generosity, and what the writer requires of the reader is not the application of an abstract freedom but the gift of his whole person, with his passions, his prepossessions, his sympathies, his sexual temperament, and his scale of values. Only this person will give himself generously [...]. (45)

The literary theorist and scholar of Russian literature Gary Saul Morson proposes a concept of the reader "as moral agent" and, echoing Tolstoy, suggests "that the explicit moral one may draw from a work is not what is most important about it, even from a moral point of view. What is important is how the work 'infects' us with moral values that we as readers practice moment to moment while reading it" (527). "Infects" is Tolstoy's metaphor, with the unfortunate vehicle of a biochemical process. But as Morson further explains, he makes clearer the actual moral process the metaphor represents:

Perhaps the real education that literature provides lies in the moment-to-moment decisions we make in the course of reading: where to extend sympathy and where to desire a just punishment; when to be carried away and when to remain skeptical; whether or not (to use a phrase that has gone out of fashion) to "identify" with a character. Whatever conclusions we may explicitly draw, we have *practiced* reactions to particular kinds of people and situations, and practice produces habits that may precede, preclude, or preform conscious moral judgments in daily life. (528)

The idea is that the reader, "as moral agent," generously co-creating with the writer the characters and their world and their words and actions and passions within that world, freely *practices* those "moment-to-moment decisions," practices judgments using his or her "scale of values."

It is on this ground that I understand Iris Murdoch when she claims in *The Sovereignty of Good* that "literature [...] is an education in how to picture and understand human situations" (34)—to which

I would add "and human actions"—or when she claims that "the enjoyment of art is a training in the love of virtue" (86). That makes sense if reading is a practice that engages a reader's whole soul in acts of intellectual, emotional, moral judgment and thus "produces habits" that may affect conduct "in daily life." When Murdoch also says that "even great art cannot guarantee the quality of its consumer's consciousness" (85), she reminds us that our "moral relation" to a story is indeed "independent" and that thus we might conduct it poorly or badly; we may read pornographically a work of art not intended that way, and when we do, we fail of the generosity and the discipline that attention to art requires. It is not so much that art is dangerous—though I am willing to say it is—as that we, agents, are always free and thus always at risk. But also always responsible. There is no all-expenses-paid "moral holiday" (James 43) in the experience of art, though any of us might wish, and act, as if there were.

So then: *can* we read about sex in the Mormon fiction of Virginia Sorensen, Maurine Whipple, Levi Peterson, Margaret Young, John Bennion, Jack Harrell, Chris Bigelow, or (so I've heard) Anita Stansfield? We surely *may*, since it is sometimes there, and since Church teachings do not interdict our reading, non-pornographically, descriptions of "the human body or sexual conduct" that are not offered to us in the generic forms of pornography. No more than any others can such works of literary art guarantee the quality of our consciousness; that is our burden. And I do think we can learn to bear it. The only way to learn at last is to practice: to read and to attend to the moment-to-moment alterations in consciousness, the decisions, the judgments, the shifts of identification and sympathy, of distance and empathy, that the sentences invite.

We could—particularly since the focus of this AML conference is writing for children and young adults—start to practice with a text like this one:

*Milo wasn't the first boy to kiss me but he was the first one to bite me. I said "Ouch," and he said, "Let me lick it better." It was when his mouth was on my shoulder and his hands tugged my camisole down that I knew I would go all the way with him. I would lose my*

*virginity with Milo in the back of his Toyota 4Runner parked above the cemetery with the lights of Salt Lake City below. Not that we were looking. I kissed him fiercely. Too fiercely. He said, "Slow down; it's better slow."*

*Did I do it because I loved him or because he was so persuasive? Did I do it because I knew Mama wouldn't approve? Did I want a baby? Or maybe it was the madness taking hold inside me. (1)*

That's Hannah Ziebarth speaking (or in these italicized paragraphs perhaps just thinking) on the first page of Louise Plummer's young adult novel *A Dance for Three* (New York: Delacorte, 2000; Dell, 2001). Reader, you are given notice: this story starts with its Mormon teenage protagonist's first sexual intercourse and goes on from there. It is as if you had asked Hannah, "What are you going through?" and now you begin to attend her answer. If you choose.

If you choose, you might use Hannah's memory here pornographically, to incite and indulge your own "sexual feelings." If you choose, you might put the book down, throw it away, or burn it in disgust and deprecation (though disgust is not a "sexual feeling," so the book would not be "pornographic" to you); in this case you're no longer its reader and I am not speaking of or to you. If you choose to be its reader, you might pay attention to Hannah's voice questioning why she chose as she did, and to the details she recalls, and come incrementally closer to moral understanding of these characters you've barely begun to know, and discover that you do know something about Milo that, on this page, Hannah doesn't quite seem to know yet: "Slow down," he says; "it's better slow." How does he know? Does he know? If he does, he is experienced where Hannah is not; and does that mean he knows, that night, more about being "persuasive" than Hannah, even now looking back, quite grasps?

If you choose, here on page one, to be Hannah's reader, her neighbor attending to her story of what she's going through, you likely should, in some degree, share or at least understand or feel some empathy or sympathy with her "sexual feelings" that night above the cemetery and the lights of Salt Lake; should feel something of why she "kissed him fiercely. Too fiercely." Clearly you might risk a pornographic effect here. You can choose to take the words suggesting

Hannah's "sexual feelings" and indulge those feelings as your own, in which case you've slid away, despite its resistance, from reading this text as the kind of text it is; or you may use them (the words and the feelings) to start to understand, with Hannah, how and why she "knew" she "would go all the way" and "lose [her] virginity." You and Hannah have a long way to go, if you choose to stay with her, listening to her (and later to her best friend Trilby and to Milo's geeky younger brother Roman). A novel gives you a long way to go, to get to know its characters; in this case, mainly Hannah's character, of which her too-soon-active sexuality is an important part. If you're the kind of generous reader Sartre proposes, you've brought your own "sexual temperament" and your "scale of values" with you. Did you suppose Louise Plummer asked you to check your scale of values at the door?

A reader who stays with Hannah, as I did last week, will watch her replay that memory several times over the course of the novel, each time revising it significantly and thus coming to know both herself and Milo more clearly, coming to think about herself and Milo more clearly, coming to understand her own sexuality, her own eros and its burdens, more clearly. Because Hannah tells almost all of her story in the present tense (this replayed and rewritten memory is the largest exception), you'll more or less "go through" whatever Hannah is "going through" as she does. It's not going to be an easy way for her or for you. Hannah might say, like Dante the poet recalling Dante the pilgrim, that "to treat of the good that [she] found" on her rugged way through the dark wild wood of error and maybe some infernal deeps and purgatorial steepes, she will also "tell of the other things." If you "were to go into the bowels of hell" with Hannah "to find out what is there," does that "make it necessary that [you] should commit one evil, or blaspheme in any way the name of [your] Maker" (though Hannah does come close to that)? No, said Brigham Young. You may go there and go there in good courage and in good hope that "by God's grace" you will find "revealed there" some of what you may need and be glad to know. But you must go knowing that as a reader you are a moral agent; you must go whole-souled. To read is

to act; and action, as Iris Murdoch writes, "is an occasion for grace, or for its opposite" (71). To read is to choose (as the Greek word *legein* and the Latin *legere* can mean both). Reader: choose.

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# *Charlotte and Eugene England*

## PERSONAL ESSAY CONTEST

The Association for Mormon Letters and *Irreantum* magazine are pleased to announce the 2010 Charlotte and Eugene England Personal Essay Contest.

Because *Irreantum* is a literary journal dedicated to exploring Mormon culture, essays must relate to the Mormon experience in some way. Unpublished personal essays up to 5000 words will be considered. Authors need not be LDS. Individuals may enter a maximum of two essays. *Irreantum* staff and members of the AML board are not eligible.

The first-place author will be awarded \$200, second-place \$150, and third-place \$100 (unless judges determine that no entries are of sufficient quality to merit awards). Publication is not guaranteed, but winners agree to give *Irreantum* first-publication rights.

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### SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS

Deadline: Saturday, May 30, 2010

Only electronic submissions will be accepted. Email your entry as an MS Word, WordPerfect, or RTF file attachment to [contest@mormonletters.org](mailto:contest@mormonletters.org).

In the subject line, please write "2010 Personal Essay Contest." Include your name, the title of your submission, and your contact information, including address and phone number, in the body of the email.

To facilitate blind judging, no identifying information should appear in the essay itself other than the title of the manuscript, which should appear as a header on each page.

Winners' names will be posted *Irreantum's* website, [www.mormonletters.org/irreantum](http://www.mormonletters.org/irreantum), on Monday, August 31, 2010.

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*Irreantum* and the AML.



## Intercession for Fernandito

TODD CHAPMAN

Oh Lord, I pray for a warrior,  
his soul afraid like a wolf  
cornered by the rancher.

Scars, like a *vaquero* romanticizing  
the horn-shaped hole a bull bored him,  
recount his battle failures.

His range reeks of rotting carrion,  
bare tree twigs and limbs like carbonized  
veins and arteries on display.

Burial linen lying folded  
and riddled with holes  
recalls the Savior—

how the tomb lay empty on third day's  
dawning—Son-God, Mighty Phoenix,  
whose waking scattered death.

Oh Lord, let the wolf lay down his life,  
so his pelt might paint the story of  
the iris blooming again in spring.

## The Ten-Tone Fountain

TODD CHAPMAN

The perpetual commotion  
    Of obsidian breakers  
    Sailing over the edge suggests  
The frailty of mortality, how  
    Quickly we rise in agitated  
    Jostlings then return to earth,  
Diminuendos into silence.

# I'll Be a Stranger to You

CARA DIACONOFF

"For I was afraid You would hear me too soon, and heal me at once of this disease of lust, which I wished rather to satiate than to see extinguished."

—St. Augustine

"Zion is my city, though I am a stranger there."

—Anonymous

In his apartment on Gagarinskii alley, Lucas Tiller was awake too early—once again. Outside his window, the dawn was an embryo, a milky pinprick flaw in the velvet drape of sky.

It was October, almost winter. He had arrived back in Moscow last New Year, so now he had lived half the time here with his wife, Marianne, and half without. It still seemed strange to wake up alone. Every morning his eyes flew open hours before the sun. He sat up, double-paned comforter wrapping his legs, forehead resting on raised knees, dozing.

He felt as if he had been dreaming of Viktor, his old Mormon mission companion. Ever since Marianne had left, Viktor had been visiting Lucas's mind, a not-quite-welcome guest, a beautiful pestilence, like the window doves at dawn. He thought of waking up those mornings, on his mission half a dozen years before, and seeing at the end of his couch-bed the top of Viktor's blond head bowed in prayer. Lucas thought of how Viktor always had to be first in everything. First another time, too, that one time—*just that once, really: the rest doesn't count*—when he'd been bowed over Lucas on the couch-bed until Lucas had begged him, begged in both their languages, to stop.

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Fall mornings in Moscow. The sullen faces of the residential slabs, their windows unlit even beneath an overcast sky. The humped and pitted sidewalks, the mud puddles crackly with their dermis of frost. A trail of rotting leaves, like the spore of some giant, suffering beast, led to the open-air market at the corner. Economic crisis or no, the gold-toothed women at the kiosks beamed. They seemed always so warmly delighted to serve you a plastic cup of tea, which you held gingerly between your fingertips at the rim; or a sausage pasty, or a banana. You could buy cigarettes, or cheeses, or tins of kerosene. At seven a.m. the bar kiosk opened, and the men leaned on their elbows on the formica table stands, quaffing their Baltikas or gin-and-tonics-in-a-can or, as ever, their vodka in paper cups. The chilly air was suffused with the smells of stale tobacco and exhaust fumes from the idling delivery trucks, peat-brown or drab green like the Army vans that also idled in the lot, attended by clusters of uniformed youths with sulky mouths. But around the square of the market the oaks and birches still shed their slimy leaves, and dogs ran loose and often rutted in the spaces between the kiosks, and at the perimeter of the market, unsheltered, stood a line of old people from the country selling potatoes or carrots, still crusted with dirt, directly from their buckets.

So beneath the chemical burn lay always the smell of earth, one indistinguishable from the other, as if even in this craven and polluted city the richness of the soil still staked the final claim.

Lucas clutched his copy of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* under one arm and manhandled the glass door to Kropotinskaya metro with the other. He glanced behind him to ensure the monster of a door (it had no spring mechanism) wasn't about to brain anybody on the outswing. "Thing could bloody kill a bloke," his friend Clyde was always saying. He took the steps into the hole at a slow trot, keeping it up past the tables displaying copies of Russian *Elle* and *Vogue*, past Lenotchka and the other babushki with their rose bouquets.

On the platform, the electronic bell sounded its two-tone welcome, and Lucas joined the forward surge into the train.

Last year, just before he and Marianne had left for Russia, he had read in his church stake newsletter about a bishop in New York City who had been called upon to minister to a subway victim. The man had been pushed to end up jammed between car and platform, condemned to death within an hour from a crushed spinal cord.

What, Lucas would often think as he boarded the metro, if such a thing were to happen to him here? Who would he ask for, who call on to be brought to him in his last half-hour of life?

*"Ostorozhno, dveri zakryvaetsya.* Take care, the doors are closing. Next stop, Park Kultury," announced the robotic female voice in the grammar-lesson tones that he had always found comforting.

At Park Kultury he had to change to the Ring line. Some days he brought along a bun for one or another of the panhandlers at the Ring stop, but this morning he'd left late. He hated to give them money; that was only supporting their operators. Reportedly they all had operators: even the ten-year-old girl with only one leg, even—perhaps especially—the veterans with no arms or legs, the "samovars," he'd heard they were called, propped up on skateboards against the stone pillars.

He remembered bringing up the question with Marianne and her not wanting to discuss it. It had been one of many topics regarding Russia that she never wanted to discuss. She wouldn't say anything, just hunch her shoulders and gaze ahead with an inscrutable expression.

She had departed for home in the middle of May. She had simply bought a plane ticket for a week later—no discussion.

One Saturday afternoon a month after Marianne had left, Lucas was standing in the bottled-spices section of Stockmann's, that favorite of Western expats, trying to decide if it were cumin or cayenne he needed more of (at these prices, you didn't want to go wrong), when he felt himself jostled from the side in a way that suggested the trolleybus or some other native—and most un-Stockmann's-like—space. *"Ostorozhno,"* he growled.

A voice drawled back at him in what he vaguely recognized as a

native-Mancunian racking of the vowels, "Sorry, friend. You were standing there so long I pegged you finally for autistic. You mind letting a bloke in to nab some turmeric?"

"How'd you know I spoke English?" demanded Lucas—he had no idea why, other than that the guy had startled him. And the guy being such a fruitcake was unnerving too. He barely reached to Lucas's shoulder, a pink-faced little mug with a receding hairline, blond eyebrows, and granny lenses tinted blue.

"Wild guess, lad," said the pink-faced individual, reaching up to sweep three bottles of turmeric into his basket, which he carried, in good fruit fashion, over his forearm. "Yank, then, are you? How long here?"

Thirty minutes later, against his better judgment Lucas found himself still standing in the parking lot talking to the guy, shifting the weight of his plastic bag from hand to hand.

Neither of them suggested finding somewhere to go sit. It didn't seem worth it. Lucas assumed—then as later, whenever the two of them would meet—that it would be the last time he'd ever see Clyde.

But Clyde had a way of finding Lucas, and Lucas, somewhat less often, had a way of succumbing long enough to loneliness and boredom to let himself be found. As the summer went on he met Clyde's friends, mostly other hedonistic Westerners from Clyde's brokerage firm and Russian gay-boys Lucas's age and younger picked up at clubs and parties and online. They accepted Lucas, alternately ignoring him and making google eyes at him, which he affected not to notice. They were vulgar flirts and would have made his stomach turn if he had taken them seriously.

He told himself it was good for Clyde to have him around; he was a helping hand, a calming influence, in a way none of Clyde's other friends could be. Sometimes—like when he was clutching Clyde's belt loop in the back seat of a gypsy cab to keep him from toppling out the window as he vomited, or mopping blood from his forehead in the alley beside Propaganda at two in the morning after an exchange with a pair of mafia flatheads—he would realize he was primarily Clyde's

Jeeves. He didn't mind the role. He was grateful enough, that year, to feel needed.

Lucas disembarked at Taganskaya and headed down Zemlyanoi Val. This was a good neighborhood to have an office in. Although it was still downtown Moscow, the buildings were older and stood no more than five stories, and the sidewalks were less cratered. A squat church with a burgundy dome dominated the central square.

At work that day he had to lay off two more people. One of them was a clear case of deadwood: Valery Afanasyevich, a salesman who had taken to showing up hours late and sometimes not at all. The grounds for the other one, Tanya, who worked in support, were sheer lack of seniority.

He greeted his motherly office manager, Olga, and endured her daily arm-squeeze. Then he gathered up the day's messages so far—no cancellations, thank God—and closed himself in his office.

His office doubled as the computer training room, but there was no one else in it right now. He sat in front of the window and gazed through stripped branches at the downward sweep of Zemlyanoi Val—trolleybus wires above and puddles below, and the crumbling yellow plaster of the building (he'd heard it was an old convent) behind the wrought-iron fence across the street.

It still did him good to walk in here. The place had the most calming effect on him of any place he went all week. He loved to come in before anyone else and look into each of the three rooms in his suite plus the open area, with its dozen felt-walled cubicles, at the end of the corridor. He loved the plastic ferns in the lobby and Olga's high wooden desk, like the lip of a red-rock cliff here in the middle of this chilly concrete forest. The smell of the office was a mixture of the dust that settled on those ferns, old tea leaves at the bottom of the spice tins that lined the kitchenette shelves, and the new nylon carpet that had been imported from Sweden. Almost a year in and even after half a dozen layoffs, he still liked to come in before anyone else and stare at the floor-plan blueprint that hung in the cubicle area, with

its colored flags representing each worker. It still seemed to him a small miracle that it was his—a living thing that he had made—and that even in these difficult times he was holding it together by dint of sheer will and heart and tireless attention to detail.

At eleven the office had been officially open for an hour, and he couldn't put it off any longer. He called Valery in first.

The man came in with a lopsided smile, as if he were gathering reserves of ironic humor to meet what he knew was in store. Lucas almost relaxed, seeing this. "Valery Afanasyevich, my friend, sit down. You received my letter?"

Valery's reserves seemed to crumble in an instant. His jaw dropped open. He slumped in his chair as if he'd suffered a stroke. When he finally closed his mouth, it was only to let out a succession of bull-like snorts. Valery in fact looked a little like a bull—full-lipped, wide-nostriled, with small commas of black hair, like horns, curling at each temple.

"Valery Afanasyevich—" said Lucas.

"My wife," said Valery.

"Your wife. What does she need?" said Lucas quickly.

"My wife has somebody else," said Valery.

Lucas—wisely, he congratulated himself—said nothing.

"You know," said Valery, "she never ordered me out of the house. As she should have done. She never slammed the door and told me the sight of me was sickening to her. No. She only shrugged and smiled. A little smile like this." He simpered. "Shrugged. And smiled."

"I'm sorry," said Lucas. "I truly am. You've been with me since the beginning. You can go back to the vocational agency, you know. You can go back there and not have to pay. I will call them and explain the situation."

"The agency. What can they do for me? They trained me to get this job. Now you tell me I must leave it."

"They can train you for another job. Or they can help you find another one like this."

Valery simpered again. The effect, on his broadly drawn features,



was faintly diabolical. It was reminiscent of the times when Lucas's father had dressed as a clown to dispense presents on the children's birthdays.

"Look, I'm very sorry," said Lucas, suddenly impatient with the idea of groveling for forgiveness. "The crash is tough on all of us right now. I'll do what I can for you. I'll give you a good recommendation. I won't mention any of the irregularities. You were a satisfactory worker."

Valery made no reply. He continued to sit in his chair, hands on the armrests as if he had been strapped to the seat. Lucas went to open the door and stood by it. He said Valery's name and got no response; he repeated it, and Valery finally stood up.

"You'll receive a month's severance pay," said Lucas. "Again, I'm sorry."

After lunch—a homemade one that the company ate all together, every day—he sat by the window with his face in his hand. He had to keep up a good front or Olga would come in and start worrying over him. The motherliness of Mother Russia. It made him want to grow a shell, crawl inside it, and roll himself down the street: down, down Zemlyanoi Val, down toward the banks of the river until it met the highway, rolling until he came to rest in one of those roadside parks—one of those random outcroppings of nature that were possible even in the dead-flat, marrow-drained outskirts of Moscow.

One Sunday afternoon last summer, Clyde and some of his groupies had taken Lucas to one of those parks off Leningradskoe Shosse. They had spent hours there until evening climbing trees and snapping pictures of each other with Clyde's Nikon. Clyde's latest flame Vanya had been there, and so had Boris: Boris of the North, gaunt and pale blond. "Anemic," Clyde sneered, but Boris was no ice-prince; he was too short for that and too much a monkey-face. That wide, rubbery mouth of his. The slight asymmetric puffiness—one side a little softer than the other—of the upper lip.

Boris had been like a creamy, petted version of Viktor. There he was again, in Lucas's thoughts. Viktor had been Lucas's first assigned companion when he had come to Russia as a Mormon missionary,

six years before. He had been a Northern blond as well: from far up North, in Vyborg, near the Finnish border. Once, early on—it had still been summer—Lucas had come home to their apartment in the early evening to find Viktor sprawled across his couch-bed, naked except for his eyeshade. Lucas had stared and stared, feeling he was looking at his twin.

*It's like he's me*, he remembered thinking, *if you left me out in the desert—lighter-haired, tanner, and more—carved*. And he had thought what a study Viktor made, lying like that, and how much he would have liked to draw him. *Oh, I wish I could draw*.

They had never done very much: just lips and tongues and hands—it had managed to be enough somehow, and just short of far too much. They had never spoken of it by day.

Night had been their time. It had been, *Viktor, man. Vika. You awake?*

*Lyushka. I'm awake. It's cold in here.*

They had never talked about it. The only time they ever had, it had ended in a small and sneering exchange of words and then Lucas saying, *I'll show you*, and pulling Viktor to the floor.

Then, five days later, Viktor had left, reassigned to a mission in France—his heart's desire. He'd been studying French for years. He wanted to go to graduate school there.

Lucas jumped when the phone rang and was momentarily stunned to hear Clyde's voice on the line.

"What's up, old son?"

"Nothing. Had to let some more people go this morning."

"Hemorrhaging, eh?" said Clyde cheerfully. "Shall we hit Rosie's tonight, then? We haven't been there in far too long."

"I'm sorry, baby. I guess I can't tonight."

"Baby?" snorted Clyde. "What're you—trying to let them think you're on the line with wifey?"

"That's it, my love," said Lucas, mock-purring. "Natashka, my wife, my Kiss-dot-com bride."

Clyde laughed mirthlessly, a sound like hiccupping. "Don't try so hard, lad. Good God, just be yourself. Whatever that is."

"Fine. As myself, I'll say that I'm afraid I can't make it tonight. I've got an appointment to talk to a higher-up in my church. I know you say not to mention my church around you . . . Wilkins?" He stopped, moved the receiver away from his ear, stared at it a second, then shrugged. The line had gone dead.

The mission office was located south of the city center in a neighborhood that looked so much like any other outer-ring district that Lucas was momentarily disoriented. Finally, he was able to navigate a path to the correct apartment slab by using as a landmark an office building draped with a Pepsi banner over a row of blown-out windows.

Once buzzed inside, he saw no one in the lobby but a kid—obviously a missionary, almost certainly American. The boy was sitting on the edge of a low sofa, hunched over a coffee table, writing busily on a sketchpad.

The lobby hadn't changed since he'd last seen it. It was a tiny, cozy room with a single window high in the back wall. The other walls were lined with metal bookcases that held rows of Latter-day Saint literature in English, Russian, and German.

"Is President Mallard in?" he asked in English.

The boy at the table looked up. He had a pale, strongly sculpted face with black-framed spectacles that magnified a pair of green eyes. The nerd effect this produced was offset by broad shoulders encased in the standard-issue missionary dress shirt. He had loosened his tie, it being late in the day.

"Yeah, sure man, he's in," said the kid. "Sasha went to get him when you buzzed. Elder Held," he said, extending a hand.

"Lucas Tiller," said Lucas. He sat down on a folding chair facing the couch.

"You're a missionary?" said Elder Held.

Lucas laughed. "No. I was one in '91-'93. Zelenograd."

Elder Held pursed his lips in a gesture of being impressed. "Cool. Back at the start of things."

"Yeah, I guess so." Lucas tried for a moment to recall what it had felt like, that sense of having been chosen by divine grace. "And you? How long've you been in country?" he said.

"Just into my second year."

"Good for you." *I sound about sixty*, he thought. "And how do you like Russia?"

"Oh, man." The kid was certainly a charmer. He acted as if it were the first time he'd ever been asked the question. "I don't know if it's a matter of *like*. The Lord's given me so many gifts here. The people I've met. It's so different from home. You can see right away how you can help."

An even younger-looking boy—presumably Sasha—interrupted, sticking his bristly dark head in from a door in the far wall.

"If you're here to see President Mallard, you may enter," he said to the room at large.

President Mallard, a middle-aged California blond in a crewneck sweater, had called Lucas in to present the idea that Lucas should help recruit the other young LDS professionals in Moscow into a more formal network affiliated with the mission. Missionaries could come to the workplaces to make presentations; there could be social events . . . it just seemed to Mallard that the professional Saints in the community had remained an untapped resource for far too long.

Lucas kept nodding. Out the corner of his eye he saw wisps of hair at his temple had escaped the draw of the ponytail. Through the window behind the older man's shoulder, he could see that dark had already fallen completely, and he felt a jab of hunger and of longing for the yellow-lit cube of his apartment.

Mallard was talking about how successful businessmen like Lucas could be a model for young missionaries. "They see all the types of futures available to them."

"Yes—I met one of them just now," said Lucas. "Elder Held, out in the lobby. He's impressive. Seems very committed."

"Yes," said Mallard. "He's very energetic, you're right. Astounding energy in that boy. The question is how usefully it's being directed. Elder Held would like to save the whole world and foresees doing it in his lifetime. This year it's Russian teenagers." He stopped and shook his head, smiling with a shrug that seemed meant to signify rueful. "He could probably use a few models of humility."

"Well, you've come to the right source then," laughed Lucas. "If you want humble. I gave up all my high ambitions months ago." He was about to add something about just being happy to get through the week, but he heard his own voice teetering on the verge of self-pity.

Mallard rewarded him with a quick grin. "I hope you'll come back to the meetings, son. The spiritual sustenance is there. You just have to reach out and take it." He shifted in his chair. "And how's your family, then? How's your wife?"

"She's fine," said Lucas. "You may have heard she decided to try going back home for a while." He paused, attempting to negotiate a path in his mind through his most recent memories of Marianne, the way they had left the future so perilously open, and the urge strong now to confide in Mallard, to *confess* to Mallard, really. If only they were Catholic, if only Mallard were a priest and the two of them were hunched right now inside the confessional, their two heads bowed on either side of that sexy little grille!

But he didn't know *what* he wanted to confess—he *hadn't* sinned—unless you counted witnessing Clyde sin at least once a week.

Lucas met Mallard's eyes, neutral and politely waiting. "I'm honored that you thought of me, sir," he said. "I'd consider it a privilege to help out in any way I can."

Mallard stood, holding out his hand, ready to see Lucas off with a squeeze of the forearm. "Well, I hope you'll consider it a good time as well. It's a stressful life here, as we all know. It can be easy to forget to loosen up and have yourself some much-needed fun."

Lucas dream-walked his way through the metro run home. It was almost seven, the air clear and cool, with that still, composed—*splinted*—quality of Moscow evenings before the fall of total night. The

metro stations felt like that, too: the crowds thinning as the dinner hour advanced. At such a moment the clapping of women's high heels down the metro's vaulted corridors sounded almost comforting, like the tolling of a grandfather clock.

In the passageway at Kropotinskaya he passed the same line of old ladies, flower-sellers, who had been standing there ten hours earlier. He nodded, said hello, slowed down. It was tempting. He hadn't done anything for anybody today. He had taken jobs away from two people.

He almost did it. But the bouquets cost four hundred rubles now, and he hadn't paid himself a salary since before the latest currency crash, in August. The remainder of the wages for the two he'd just laid off would have to come from his own savings.

He fell upon the brain-a-bloke glass door and had just stumbled through it when he saw the truncated figure out of the corner of his eye. One of the "samovar" quadriplegic veterans, nothing but a head and torso, propped up on his skateboard outside the station this time, in a circle of streetlamp light.

The man wore the jacket of his gray military uniform; the sleeves hung empty, trailing off the board onto the ground. He looked to be in his early thirties—an average-looking, perhaps even once-upon-a-time handsome, man with curly brown hair under his gray beret. He wore a pair of steel-rimmed glasses.

Lucas stopped. It was far from the first time he had seen one of them, one of these men who had no limbs at all. But he never wanted to face it, did he? He never wanted to believe that the Lord could allow one of His creatures to live on in such a debased state. Back home, if you saw such people, they at least rode in wheelchairs, or maybe even had artificial limbs—the point was they had things around them, a whole cushioned apparatus, so that you could more readily accept that behind their eyes still resided a brain and a soul that functioned just like yours did.

Lucas walked into his line of vision and bent down so as to talk. He was tempted to crouch but decided not to. "Hello, comrade," he said. "How are you today?"

Though Lucas stood not more than a foot away, the man didn't appear to see him. Was it possible he was blind, and deaf, as well? But Lucas was close enough to tell that the eyes weren't blind. Behind the lenses they were fixed on a point across the street.

"What do you need?" asked Lucas. "You need anything?" He had already decided to ignore, just for now, the cautions about supporting the subway panhandling mafia.

"So, do you come out here every day?" asked Lucas. One-sided though it was, he had to see this conversation through. He didn't know why. He'd stopped expecting the man to answer, so he was startled to hear a staccato voice erupt into the space between them.

"Cigarette," the voice said. "You got a cigarette, guy?"

"Ah," said Lucas. Instinctively he glanced behind him, toward the line of kiosks. A brief movie flickered in his mind, in which, on a spring day alive with the twittering of birds and the rushing of melting snow in the creek banks, he crouched next to the limbless man under a tree, the two of them talking and laughing. "Now?" Lucas would say, and the limbless man would nod, and Lucas would stick the cigarette in his mouth while the limbless man puffed.

But when he stepped closer, he saw that the tobacco kiosk was dark. It was already closed for the night.

"I'm sorry, comrade." Lucas felt stricken. "I can't help you."

The man registered no response. His eyes went back to the point they had been trained upon, across the street.

Maybe soon his operators would come to take him away. Who were those people? Dagger-thin, dark men with empty eyes? Or could they just as easily be women? Brawny, lipless types, outlaw matrons. They would have to be so intimate with the quadruple amputee. They would have to pick him up, to touch him, every day. But probably they didn't care about that. Probably they just scooped him up like a sack of meal and dumped him roughly in the hold of the van they used to transport their sorry charges back to whatever ramshackle squat they housed them in during off hours.

Still, maybe not. Maybe there was some shred of humanity—however hypocritical, however useless—that poked through even

the cartilaginous fabric of such deadened souls as that. Maybe they joked with the limbless man; maybe they were all, in some rough way, pals. "Hey, watch the head—it's all I've got!" and then maybe one of those great, bluff, heart-of-gold matrons would wink and snort, "Well . . . not *all*"—and so you would know that everything was okay; you could relax, calm down now. Everything was tolerable in their world—and in yours.

When Lucas's feet hit the sidewalk, the chill night air lashed his forehead like a burst of sea spray.

Fall nights in Moscow. These nights were tinged with the smell of wood fires, and dogs with kingly ruffs barked in echoing stone passageways. On some blocks, the only light came from a single apartment window. Every few steps a doorway opened into a courtyard black as a shroud, perhaps with one square of tangerine light shining like a distant prize. The play of black and light had always seemed to him a code. What precise complex of disappointments and desires would you have to experience in life to gain the secret knowledge that would crack it?

Moscow was a dark, decaying place, where you ought to be afraid to walk the streets at night. Yet Lucas never was, because it was *so* dark that there were no shadows. Shadows were the source of fear. His mother had known that. That was why, in the room he'd shared with his brother Landon when they were kids, she wouldn't turn on the night light after he had gotten old enough to start school. She would pull the curtains yet more tightly closed, turn the mirrors to the wall, and leave the closet doors open so that the monsters couldn't hide, and then she'd sit on the edge of one of their beds and tell them how the dark was their friend. She'd tell them about cocoons and caves where ancient people had lived and remind them of the "house" they'd made under a blanket over her desk. "Why do you love that so much? Because it's small, and only you can fit inside, and because it's *dark*, boys. It's a secret." She'd tell them about the darkroom where her uncle had developed close-up photographs of garden plants, making them seem as strange and foreign as jungle growths; and she'd



tell them about how they had been before they were born, fish-like creatures curled up in a womb, a thing that was like a velvet-lined pocket of sea water.

Lucas went up to his apartment, the one he had lived in alone now as long as he'd lived in it with Marianne. It was a one-room, stripped of the worst excesses of the old tenant—love beads, wall-to-wall pile carpeting, and tapestries in vermilion hues that had clashed with the auburn of the couch upholstery. What it had now was a braided rug on a wood floor, a glassed-in cabinet full of science-fiction paperbacks, and a modular L-shaped desk in the corner with computer, fax, and stereo. The rug was a touch sun-bleached at the edges, but Lucas liked this feature. It made him feel warmer to look at it.

He lay down on the couch. The auburn vinyl was now covered with a white cotton throw. He told himself he would get up and eat something and not fall asleep for the night without pulling out the couch. He closed his eyes and thought about Elder Held and his loosened collar. He knew it was a sin, and he knew he made it even filthier by trying to excuse it as only thoughts.

*If Marianne were here . . . well, what?*

He thought of what his father had said, that time in the cab riding back to the hotel after the temple ceremony in Washington. Lucas had married Marianne six months after he'd returned from his Russia mission in '93. He had never told anyone about Viktor.

Out of the corner of his eye that night, in the back seat of the cab, he could tell his father was staring at him as if trying to memorize his profile. It was a trick Sam used from time to time. Resolutely Lucas himself had stared ahead, not taking the bait.

That got easier when finally Sam started talking. "Hasn't sunk in yet, has it?"

Lucas had granted him a flick of his head to the side. "Guess not."

His father had nodded. "Maybe tomorrow, when it's just the two of you." He reached over to knock Lucas's knee with a loose fist. "She's a pretty girl."

"Yes, Dad."

"You have your faith in common. That's really what matters."

"I know."

A minute during which the only sound was the relentless blowing of the cab's heater, a tiny sirocco. Then Sam had come out with it. "The sex part," he said.

"Oh, Dad—" Lucas threw a glance toward the cabbie.

"The sex part," repeated Sam staunchly, at the same volume, "is—I just want you to know this—the least important part." He reached to place the same loose fist heavily on Lucas's shoulder.

"Well, I don't know," said Lucas, trying unsuccessfully to shrug off his father's hand.

"No. No. It really is. You know, your mother and I—well—it was never exactly like we couldn't keep our hands off each other."

"Oh, good grief, Dad." And then it had hit him. "Wait a minute. Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because it's something it seems clear you need to know," his dad had said, and that had been the abrupt end of the topic.

*Ridiculous, these worries.* He loved Marianne. What they had together was real. It was not like his daydream of being buds with the "samovar." He and Marianne loved each other, and their sex life had been just fine.

Lucas was asleep. Outside, a light snow fell. It was nothing but a slightly thicker frost; it wouldn't stick; it would be gone by morning. Inside his front room, one lamp burned. It shone onto the courtyard through the uncovered window, a beacon for any passerby who might have come to Moscow from some other place. It shone—a lone, bright clue—for any traveler wishing to break the code of the secret city night.

## I'll Tell You What the Butterfly Represents

VANESSA ARDEN NUCKOLLS

She flits in, bats her wings  
like eyelashes, never stands  
still. I ask her why she  
can't fly in a straight line.  
She says, "It's not that I  
can't." She says, "It's that I  
have, and it's unflattering  
to my body type."

## The Memo Box

HEIDI TIGHE

On the day that Sister Jenkins killed her husband, my mother got another package in the mail.

"Mom," I yelled as the mailman walked toward our house. "Package!"

The packages were usually boring—makeup or books or Pizza Hut gift cards for Dad—but sometimes they were cool, a box of Legos or a video game demo. As I closed the door behind the mailman, Mom was already slitting the box open. It was a book on meditation. Mom grinned at me. "Totally boring, huh?" she said, but she wrote, "Aunt Marge b-day, mail by Aug. 26," on a sticky note and pressed it to the book's cover.

I ripped open an envelope with the MyPoints logo on it. Two Dominos gift cards fell into my hand. "Oh, man! They screwed up!" I showed Mom the cards. "Dominos! They didn't send Pizza Hut."

She laughed as she took the cards. "No, that's right. I thought we'd try Dominos for a change."

"But Dad *hates* Dominos. He likes Pizza Hut."

Mom cleared her throat, flipping through the rest of the mail. "You know how busy Dad's been lately." She didn't look up as she spoke. "He's not around for pizza night much anyway. And we like Dominos, right?" I didn't answer, and she glanced sideways at me. "Here." She handed me a postcard. "It's for Dad from Uncle Ed. Put it in the memo box so he sees it when he comes home."

The memo box was one of the things that Mom had gotten "free or way cheap." She was always getting things this way. They came in brown boxes that appeared on our doorsteps or in bulging shopping bags that she brought home after she had vanished downtown for

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Honorable Mention, 2007 *Irreantum* Fiction Contest

an hour. "Guess how much this was?" she'd sometimes ask my father, clapping her hands and laughing. "Guess! What do you think?"

My father would glance at the item. "Well," he'd drawl, taking in a recently unwrapped statue or a stack of canned pineapple or a stockpile of toothbrushes. He'd cock his jaw for a second, then make a guess that I knew was too high.

"Ha!" my mother would exclaim. "They were only ninety-nine cents! For all of them!" She'd prance in front of him, flourishing the receipt as evidence of her conquest, and dance off to stash her prizes while my father smiled—at her, at me—and slipped back into his article.

The summer before I turned eleven, it had been a long while since they'd played their game. My mother still bargain shopped, but she didn't smile or ask my father to guess their prices when she got home from the store anymore. When things arrived in the mail, she slit their taped flaps with the sharp cutting knife, shook the box until something fell out, and took it up to the storage room or marked it as a gift. She was fast, her hands sweeping in rows across the packages, and within moments the table was stripped of the boxes, the packages, the packing peanuts, leaving no sign of her victory. The memo box had been one of the last things she and Dad had played their game with.

The day of the stabbing, Mom and I came into the house together after baseball practice. I sat at the table, still reveling in the glory of the sun and the sound of the ball thwacking against the bat. Instead of joining me, Mom hung her purse and jacket on the hooks in the hall, then slumped into the couch, pushing the heels of her shoes down against the ground until they popped off her feet. Her eyelids drooped shut. She looked tired and heavy, as though her body were filled with lead instead of water, which, I had recently learned, made up seventy percent of our bodies.

"Hey, Mom," I said. "Are you okay?"

Her eyes jerked open, like they did when I yanked on her hand in the night when I was sick.

"Of course." She straightened herself up on the couch. "I'm fine. It's just so hot."

"Do you want a glass of water?"

"No," she said. Her eyes fell to the floor, then jumped back up toward me. "Thanks. But I'd love it if you'd check the memo box."

I ran through the kitchen. I loved the memo box, with its slit in the top for dropping in a note, and the little door in the bottom that I opened to pull things out when my flag was raised. Mom had screwed little metal flags to the side of the box and painted our names under them. There was my name, and "Mom" and "Dad," each one stenciled onto the red paint in white lettering. Mom's flag wasn't up, but Dad never remembered to use them anyway, so I opened the door at the bottom of the box. A white slip of paper snuggled behind it. I took it back to Mom. I watched while she spread the paper open with her thumb and forefinger. Her eyes scanned across and down the page until they reached the bottom. She crumpled the note and laid her head against the couch for just one more second. Then her eyes flashed open. A smile was pinned to her face.

"Well, Bucko." She gathered herself together and rose from the couch. "Dad's working late again, so it's just you and me. What do you say to pizza and a movie? We'll make a night of it."

She wanted me to be pleased, but nights when the two of us did something "special" weren't fun anymore. I wanted to spend a night with Dad, the three of us together at a movie or going bowling. I nodded and tried to smile.

"Great," she said. "Ham and pineapple sound okay?"

I shrugged and nodded. Ham and pineapple sounded okay every time.

The phone rang while we were eating. Mom wiped her fingers on a napkin and reached over to pick it up. "Hello?" she used the voice that grownups use when they aren't really paying attention to each other. She gave me a signal that meant she would try to make this quick.

"No," she said after a minute. She moved the phone to her other ear and rose from the couch. "No, I haven't heard. What's going on?"

She had moved into the kitchen, and all I could hear above the sound of the TV were her muffled exclamations. Mostly she was

silent. I could picture her standing in the middle of the kitchen, her eyes wide, her hand over her mouth.

"Is there anything we can do?" I heard her ask at last. "I mean, I suppose there's really nothing, but I just can't believe . . . I just don't know. Yes, I do. Yes, good-bye." The phone beeped as she hung it up. It seemed like I waited for a long time before she emerged from the kitchen to put the phone on its base. She stood with her hand on her mouth, staring at the wall.

I shifted. "What's going on?" I asked at last.

She started. "What, honey?" She shook her head as though to clear it, quickly running one hand through her hair and smoothing the sleeves on her blouse. "Nothing. Just something happened to someone."

"Someone we know?"

"Just someone. Don't worry about it."

*Don't worry about it* was my parents' way of saying not to ask any more questions. I turned back to the TV, and Mom sat down beside me, but I could tell she wasn't watching the movie. As soon as it was over, she patted my knee. "Sleep tight," she murmured. "See you in the morning." She caught my arm as I rose to go and pulled me back to her. "I love you," she murmured, wrapping me into a hug. "You know that, right?" I nodded and she smiled. "Good. Now off to bed."

As usual, there was no sign of Dad at breakfast the next morning. He was at the office early. After eating and chores, Mom told me I could go play ball. She had some errands to run. "You'll play with Dallin this morning," she said as she hung her purse on her shoulder. "I'll be home around lunch. Sound okay?"

I had already grabbed my bat and mitt and was headed out the back door toward the lot that filled the area behind the homes on our block, where I could see my friends standing. "Hey, guys!" I shouted as I neared them, but none of them answered. They were huddled in a group, too enthralled in something to hear me coming. I saw Dallin and Garret clustered around Taren. Their heads were bent toward him, their bats and gloves abandoned on the ground. None of them

moved. I fell silent as I approached. "What's going on?" I whispered. They silenced me without looking away from Taren.

"Serious," Taren said as I shouldered my way into the circle. "Serious. She just stabbed them while they were sleeping. Both of them, before they even had a chance to wake up." His eyes gleamed and his voice lowered. "Then she left them lying there in their blood and went absolutely crazy."

"What?" I interrupted him.

"Sister Jenkins," Taren told me solemnly. "I heard my mom talking about it this morning. Sister Jenkins went into her house and saw her husband with this other woman, and she just picked up a knife and stabbed them both to death."

I glanced at Dallin and Garret for a cue. Taren was always telling a story, and it was sometimes hard to separate his imagination from his knowledge, both of which were expansive. "Promise," he said, and ran his forefinger across his chest in an X. "Swear or die."

I stood on the dusty field watching my friends bask in the news, seeing the way their faces hovered in the shadows of their caps. Their skin glimmered with the off-light of early morning; their faces seemed frozen by the story. The sun had only reached part of the field, leaving the other half dim and chill, still lurking under the shade of the houses and trees that clustered along its edge. It felt impossible that this news could be true in our neighborhood, about a person who lived under these trees and slept in one of these homes.

"That's crazy," I declared. The three stared at me. "Well, what about the police?" I demanded. "Do *they* know about it?"

Taren leaned toward me. "She called them herself," he whispered. His eyes were wide with the stunned sincerity of a natural performer. "She says she doesn't remember anything, just that she was driving along and suddenly there was blood all over her hands. She called the police and they came and got her and took her to her house and there they found the bodies, her husband and this other lady, dead and cold."

"She *didn't know* she killed them?" I snorted. I looked around, expecting to see my skepticism reflected in Dallin and Garret's faces,



but they were staring at Taren, their shoulders slumped forward and their mouths slightly open, like fish being pulled downstream on a hook.

"She says she forgot she killed them. My dad says if she thinks the insanity plea is going to help her any here, then she should have gotten to know Idaho better before she decided to kill her husband. He says she'll go away for life." He grinned and slammed the ball into his glove.

I swallowed, scuffing the ground with my sneaker. "That sucks," I muttered.

Taren shrugged. "It's what I heard." He tossed his ball into the air and caught it in his glove. "Let's play ball."

I listened to the ball thump in his glove and watched his smile gleam as he tossed an imaginary curve ball toward the edge of the field.

"Sure, dude," I said. "Let's play ball."

The morning drained away in the slow toss of the ball and its muffled thumps as it connected with bats and mitts. Around noon, we heard the grinding of Dallin's father's truck climbing toward the houses, and Dallin tossed the ball at Taren. "Later, dudes," he said. "Lunchtime." We tossed the ball for a few moments more, then Taren heard his mother calling across the lots. He ran toward her voice, and Garret turned to follow him. "I'm hungry too," he said as they went, and I was left standing alone in the middle of the field. I scuffed my feet at the dirt and turned toward home with my hands in my pockets.

I hated lunch that day. The light that oozed through the curtains was muted and the room felt dark. I looked to see if a light bulb was out, but all four of them gleamed in the cover. The tomato soup tasted dry, and the toasted cheese sandwich Mom had set beside it looked limp and dark. I pushed my food away and stared at the table. My stomach was miserable.

"Sweetie?" The word jolted me.

"Yeah?"

"Are you okay? You look terrible."

I shifted in my chair. I didn't want to talk about it, but Taren's words had left pictures in my head, and I didn't know what to do with them. My brain felt dirty from knowing these horrible things, things that even my mother didn't know. "Mom," I said, "do you know Sister Jenkins?"

She put her sandwich down and leaned forward, her arms resting on the table. She put her thumbnail between her teeth and swallowed while she looked at me. At last she dropped her hand. "Where'd you hear about Sister Jenkins?"

"Just some of the guys." I began peeling at the crust on my sandwich. "They were all talking about it today." Mom closed her eyes. She looked sad. I felt like I had done something wrong in asking about this, in even hearing about it. At last she cleared her throat.

"Sister Jenkins is a lady in our neighborhood," she said. "She moved in just around the block about three months ago."

"Did she have any kids?"

"Does," Mom corrected. "Does she have any kids. And no, she doesn't. That's probably why you don't know her."

"Did she really kill her husband?"

Mom ran the flat of her hand across her hair. She rubbed at the skin on her throat and pressed her lips together. "In America," she said at last, "we don't decide whether or not someone did something until we've heard all the facts. Until then, we just believe the best we can of people and hope that we know the truth someday."

"But Taren said his blood was all over her," I persisted. "He said that she tried to tell the police she doesn't remember it but she saw him talking to another woman so she stabbed them both dead and their blood got all over her."

"How did you—where did Taren—" her voice failed, and she pressed her fingers against her eyes. "Look," she said finally. "I'm really sorry that Taren was telling you those things. Those aren't things that little boys should have to think about."

"But is it *true*?" I demanded. "Did she really do all those things?"

Mom looked down at the table. "Maybe," she said. "It *looks* like she did." Her eyes flickered back up at me. "But you remember," she said

firmly, "the police have to finish their investigation before we decide anything about Sister Jenkins."

I was puzzled. I knew plenty of wives and husbands. There were all the people in the neighborhood, Taren's parents, my own mom and dad. Killing wasn't part of marriage. They just didn't fit together.

"But *why*?" I asked. "Why would she do that just because he talked to a lady? You talk to other people. Dad talks to other people."

"It wasn't just—" Mom swallowed. "They weren't—" her voice broke. She blew out hard and stared at the table. She blinked, her lips parting to let slow breaths of air in and out. At last she swallowed. "Her husband wasn't just talking to another woman," she said slowly. "He had decided that he loved another woman instead of Sister Jenkins. That can be," she paused and swallowed again. "That can be very hard for a person to handle."

"Hard enough to *kill* him?"

"Maybe." My mother stared out the window as she spoke. "If you were a certain type of person and you had to live with it long enough, I think you might lose control, forget what you were doing."

She glanced at my eyes and waved her hand in front of her face, as though trying to brush her words out of the air between us. "It's hard for kids to understand," she said. "I shouldn't be talking to you about it."

The air in the kitchen was cold and Mom's slow, distracted words made me nervous. I slipped out of my chair and grabbed my bat and glove. "Okay," I muttered. I turned and ran outside into the sunlight.

Dad's Stratus was parked in the driveway when I came home at five-thirty. I dashed up the stairs, my bat banging against them even though Mom had told me never to let it do that. "Dad!" I shouted. The living room was empty, and the sound of running water drifted in from the kitchen.

"Dad?" I ran into the kitchen where Mom stood stirring something in a pot on the stove.

"He's in the back yard," she said. "Go out and say hello, and then the two of you come in and wash your hands for dinner. And *don't* let that bat bang against the wall."

In the field that afternoon, I had forgotten about Sister Jenkins and her husband, but at dinner Dad started talking about it. He snorted while he scooped up a spoonful of beans and dropped them onto his plate. "It's a load of crap, is what it is." He tipped the gravy bowl over his plate and shoveled gravy onto his beans with the flat of his fork. "And it's a bad load of crap on top of it. If she really expects anyone to believe that she just woke up in her car and didn't remember killing her husband, she's the biggest moron we've had in town for a long time."

Mom cleared her throat. "More ham?"

He speared a slice of meat and scraped it onto his plate. "I just hope the prosecutor sees this for what it is," he growled into his food. "Women are so stupid. They think if they cry enough they can get away with anything. With murder." He chortled. "Get it? 'With murder'?"

"Perhaps she isn't." Mom hesitated. "Maybe she isn't trying to get away with anything. What if she's telling the truth?"

"Oh, please." Dad dropped his fork. It clattered against his plate. "You don't honestly believe that's what happened."

She shrugged. "I believe it *could* have happened. I guess it's possible."

"Oh, you do, huh?" Dad leaned across his plate. "I suppose you read that in some book somewhere, somewhere on the web about all these poor persecuted women whose husbands are so awful to them and so we shouldn't blame them if they end up killing their husbands in the end, eh? Heard some sob story on Oprah?"

"I don't *watch* Oprah," Mom said, "and that's not what I'm saying. I'm just saying that I think it would be possible. I can imagine it, that's all."

"You can, huh?" he snorted. "Well, if *you* can imagine it, then of course it's true." He rolled his eyes and lifted his glass to his mouth.

"I didn't say I *believed* her." Mom's voice sounded like it was being stretched too thin. Her face was tight. "I just said I can see it happening."

My father pushed his plate away and leaned farther across the table. "Okay," he sneered, punching his forefinger into the table for empha-

sis. "So you can believe that this woman decides to kill her husband, so she chops him and his little girlfriend up while they're in bed—"

"Bill!" Mom glanced at me. He ignored her.

"And then she just *conveniently* forgets why his blood is all over her hands, calls the cops, and finds out when they come and get her, lo and behold, she's carved her husband to death. You believe that? You seriously do?" He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. "That's just pathetic. Give me a freakin' break."

Mom pulled herself back. She braced her hands on the edge of the table. They were trembling, but her voice was hard and tempered. "I'm not saying that she planned to kill him and then forgot." She stared at my father across the table. She braced her jaw and something in her eyes glinted into hardness as she stared into my father's face. "I'm just saying," she said deliberately, "that after living with the cheating bastard long enough she might have just forgotten *not* to kill him."

Her words hovered above our dining room table. Dad's face was blank, as though someone had wiped an eraser over it and left only the lines of his lips and nose and eyes, with no emotion or understanding behind them. Mom was frozen. A muscle jumped in her cheek. No one moved. After a moment she stood and wiped her hands on her thighs. Without looking back at either of us, she turned and climbed the stairs to her bedroom.

There weren't any more dinners together after that. Mom didn't check the memo box or the answering machine when she came back from the store, and neither of us commented as we set the table with two plates, two forks, two knives, and two glasses. We sat down across from each other and acted like things were normal while we talked about baseball and shopping.

One day the mailman knocked on our door.

"Hey!" he said. "Is your mom home? I got another package for you."

"Mom!" I yelled up the stairs. "The mailman is here."

I heard the shuffle of her feet upstairs. "Coming." Her voice sounded tired, and she managed only a small smile for the mailman when she got to the door and reached for the pen.

"Y'all right today?" he asked as he clipped the pen back to the board and swung a wide, soft package out from under his arm.

"Yes." Mom pushed her lips into a smile. "Yes, I'm fine. It's just one of those tired days, you know."

"I know 'em." He grinned and raised his hand in a wave before he bounded down the stairs two at a time, his long blue legs carrying him back to his truck on the corner.

I reached for the package to read the label. "What is it?"

Mom glanced at it. "It's just a travel bag." She set the package on the table and sat down in front of it. She blew out a deep breath and for a moment she just sat there, her hands spread flat on the table, her muscles seeming to soak in the relief of the chair beneath her. After a minute she turned to me.

"Would you get me the scissors, babe?"

I pulled the scissors from the junk drawer and handed them to her, blade facing toward me, just like I'd been taught. She took them and began to run one long blade along the tape at the edge.

"Hey, Mom," I grinned at her, "how much do you think I think this cost?"

She looked up and smiled. She even chuckled a little. "I don't know." She put the scissors down and rested her chin in her hands. "How much do you think it cost?"

"I bet it was free." I nodded.

"Close," she laughed. "I had to pay a dollar-six for shipping. But you're pretty good at this game." She rubbed my arm. "That was a great guess."

Inside the package was a soft suitcase and a couple of smaller bags. I watched Mom open each piece, peer inside, and place them on the table in front of her. I waited for her to slip them back inside each other, press them into their bag, and put them in the closet or write someone's name on a post-it note and press it against them. Instead, she turned to me and motioned toward the stairs.

"You know what?" she said. "Why don't you run upstairs and get some of your shirts and jeans and underwear?"

I was puzzled. "What for?"

She shrugged. "Just because. We should be prepared."

"Prepared for what? Like an emergency?"

"Sure," she said. "Why not? What if there were a flood or an earthquake, and we needed to get out of here right away? Or maybe what if we just decided that we wanted to go on a trip and we didn't feel like packing at all? This way we just have to get in our car and drive away." She paused. "Any time. We could just leave."

I turned toward the stairs.

"Shoes and pajamas and socks too," she said. "Clean socks."

"Aw, Mom," I groaned.

"What?" she teased. "Just because there's an earthquake you think I'm going to let you run around in dirty socks?" She laughed. "Get going."

I trudged up the stairs and came back with armfuls of clothing I had scooped out of my drawers. She laughed when she saw me.

"I'd like to thank you for doing such a neat and thorough job," she grinned. She took the clothes from my arms and began shaking things out of the pile. "That makes my job much easier." She flipped open the top of the large bag, and I saw that she had already put two toothbrushes and a tube of toothpaste in the suitcase. She began folding my clothes and tucking them into the suitcase, patting them into a square in the corner of the bag. She sighed with satisfaction as she looked at them. "All right," she said after a minute, "I'll be right back."

When she returned she was carrying a stack of her own clothes. She put them next to mine and slid a bottle of contact solution in between our piles. She put the two smaller bags on top of the clothes, and I could hear them rattle with makeup and other girl things. She zipped the bag and hefted it off of the table. "Excellent," she said. "Now we're ready for anything that might come our way." She gestured for me to follow her. "Come on. Let's put this in the car." I tried to keep pace with her long steps and the rhythm of the suitcase swinging at her side as she walked up the driveway. She went straight to the back of the Buick, which my parents called the Bolt Box. I loved the way it smelled in the summer when the sun had warmed it through and baked its upholstery all day, but Mom said it was a dying piece of junk that need to be donated to a monster truck rally. Instead of

reaching to unlock the handle, Mom walked to the back of the car and slid her key into the trunk. It popped open and she raised it, steadying it with one hand and peering inside. It was clean, of course, completely empty except for a set of jumper cables, a spare tire, and a jack. She swung the bag into the trunk and let the trunk's lid fall shut. She pulled the keys loose, and they dangled from her fingertips as she gazed at the car. At last she breathed out. "Nice work, kiddo." She rumbled my hair and laughed as I pulled away and grimaced. "Sorry," she said. "Sometimes I forget that you're a big man now." She paused. "Come on," she said, and she took my hand to lead me back up to the house.

The next morning was a Sunday. I opened my eyes and rolled over to hide under the covers for another few minutes before church, but I realized that the house was silent. There were none of the usual sounds that warned me that I had only fifteen minutes left before Mom came knocking on my door and told me to get dressed and come down to breakfast. There was no running shower, no sound of feet padding across the linoleum floor in the kitchen below my room. I tried to ignore it and go back to sleep, but the silence was louder than the Sunday noises would have been. I wandered downstairs. The kitchen was empty, and Dad was asleep on the living room sofa. His flag on the mailbox was up. I opened the door and retrieved a slip of paper with Mom's writing on it.

"Dad," I whispered, standing by the couch where he slept. "Dad," I said more loudly, shaking his shoulder. "Mom left you a note."

Dad grunted. He opened his eyes into two reluctant slits and stared at me. "What?" he croaked.

"Mom left you a note in the memo box." I handed him the paper. He grunted and smacked his lips together, moistening his mouth before unfolding the note. He stared at it for a moment, then sighed and dropped it on the ground. "Your mother's gone to the jail to visit that woman who killed her husband," he said. "Some damn Relief Society visit, I guess." He rubbed his eyes. "Looks like we're stuck with each other." He stared at me. "What do you want to do today?"

"It's Sunday," I reminded him. "Church."



"Yeah." He blinked. "Right. Church."

During church we sat in the back row and by the end of sacrament Dad was fidgeting, flipping through the hymnbooks, and looking at the clock while he stretched. Finally he leaned over. "Let's get outta here," he muttered at the top of my head. "You wanna blow this joint?"

I shrugged. "Whatever."

We snaked through the parking lot back toward the Buick. I slid inside and leaned back against the seat, soaking in the smell of the old leather and the cracked plastic casing that lined the car. I remembered the packed suitcase in the trunk, and I almost mentioned it to Dad, but when I turned to him, his face was set and distracted. I closed my mouth and looked out the window. I wished Mom were there with me instead of visiting that woman in jail.

"Dad," I asked, "do you think that woman murdered her husband?"

"Huh?" He jumped. "Oh, um, sure, I guess so."

"But *why*? Why would she do that?"

He shrugged. "Beats me. People do stupid stuff."

"But that's not just stupid. That's—" I broke off. "Why would she kill him if she loved him?"

"She obviously *didn't* love him," he snapped. "Otherwise she wouldn't have knifed him to death." He punched the radio on.

"Mom says that Sister Jenkins could go crazy from being sad about her husband," I said. Dad ignored me and cranked the volume.

Mom's car was in the driveway when we got home. Dad put the car in park and glanced at his watch. "Looks like your Mom's home. I gotta do something at the office," he said. "See ya later, kid."

I slumped in my seat. "Sure," I said as I opened the car door and slid out. "Whatever." He finished backing down the driveway before I had reached the front door.

Mom wasn't in the living room or the kitchen. The bathroom door was open and the lights were off. None of her usual everyday noises trickled down to me from upstairs.

"Mom?" I ran up the stairs and tapped on her door.

There was a silence. Then her voice whispered through the door, "Come in."

She was sitting on the edge of her bed. The window curtains were open, and all the lights were off. Outside the window, I could see the distant motion of a sprinkler jogging around a lawn, its silver arc glinting over the grass as it splashed. From the dim room, the grass seemed too green, as though someone had taken a strip of color and pinned it into the frame of the window. The sky seemed fake, like a bluewashed backdrop punctuated by too-perfect clouds. From our window, the world that we stared at together seemed like a mirage that was far too bright to be real.

I sat on the bed. "Were you with the murderer today?"

When she spoke, her voice sounded strained and polished. It reminded me of the hard edge of rose quartz crystals that you buy in tourist shops, each one ground down until its edges become smooth and slippery and cold.

"Yes," she said. "I visited her."

I imagined my mother dressed as she was when she went visiting teaching, her khaki slacks flowing down her legs, a colored blouse tucked in at the waist, her feet perched in those shoes that were like her Sunday shoes but without the tall heel. I saw her sitting across from the murderer, who had a dark, vague shape instead of a body.

"Mom," I said, "Dad says that woman really did kill her husband."

Mom was silent as she stared out the window. She followed the sprinkler once around the lawn with her eyes. "Yes," she said at last. "Yes, she really did."

"And she's a bad person." I watched her, wanting to make certain I was right. "She killed her husband because she's a bad person."

Mom sighed, a deep sigh that lifted her shoulders almost level with her chin and dropped them slowly back down again.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I suppose she must be."

"And because she didn't really love him," I tried to grope through the mystery. "Because she was a bad woman, and she didn't really love him."

Mom put her arm around my shoulders and pulled me close to her, her hand on my shoulder, her hip against my leg. She felt frail, as though she were trying to soak in comfort by having me near her. "I don't know," she said slowly. "I think she mostly killed him because

she was sad." She swallowed as her eyes darted back and forth across the world outside the window. "She was confused and lost and lonely, and she didn't know what to do anymore." Mom's voice cracked. She blinked. "It was like everything that mattered to her in her life had slipped away, and she wasn't sure what she had done wrong, or what her life meant anymore, or what she was supposed to do now, so she did the only thing that came to her."

"But just because you're sad doesn't make it right," I persisted. "It's wrong to kill somebody."

Mom looked at me. She smiled and squeezed my knee. "You're right." She gave a tiny nod. "It is wrong." She paused, her eyes drifting back toward the window. "But she did have to do something. A woman has to do *something*."

Beyond the window frame, the chase of the sprinkler and the ripple of leaves in the wind played over and over. Finally, Mom pulled her arm from around my shoulder and gave me a quick pat in the small of my back. "Go downstairs," she said. "I'll be down soon."

It was late when Dad came home. The hum of his car pulling into the driveway and the sudden stillness of the cut motor pulled me out of the almost-sleep I had slipped into. I lay in bed with my eyes open and listened to the sounds of him coming home. I heard the plunk of his keys landing on the table and the growl of water running through the pipes that surrounded the house. The toilet whooshed. Next should come the creak of his feet on the stairs, his feet turning left in the hallway to carry him into the bedroom where he would crawl into bed next to my mother. I listened for it, but it never came. Instead, the light from the living room, which seeped up the stairs and under my door, vanished, and the house faded into silence.

The next morning, breakfast was already made when I woke up.

"Morning, lazy bones." Mom rumbled my hair as she handed me an empty plate and pointed to the table, where another plate full of pancakes sat. "Eat up. We've got a lot to do today."

I slumped into my chair at the table, spearing two pancakes and dropping them on my plate. "What's going on?"

"You and I are going on vacation. I got to thinking last night, and

I decided we'd head out and visit Grandma for a week. How's that sound?"

I yawned. "What about Dad?"

Mom was silent for only a second, her hands continuing to whisk things from the stove into the dishwasher. "He's working," she said. "He's got a lot of stuff going on at the office."

"So let's wait till he's done," I said. "I want him to come."

"No." Her voice was almost a snap. She cleared her throat and softened her voice. "I think it would be fun to take off today." She smiled at me. "It'll be great. We can just get in the car and go find wild adventures."

"We gotta pack," I reminded her.

"Nope," she said. "We packed two days ago, remember?"

"But that's for *emergencies*. You said like if we had a hurricane or something."

Mom began scrubbing the frying pan. "There are lots of different kinds of emergencies."

"Fine," I muttered. "I guess we can see Dad when we get back. He'll still be here."

Mom froze in the middle of scrubbing. She looked up at me, her eyebrows drawn together.

"I suppose he will, won't he?" she said. She stared past me, out the window. She reached up and clasped her hand around the back of her neck, as she always did when she was thinking.

"You know what?" she said suddenly. "You're right. I do have a few more things to pack after all. Finish your breakfast and go outside, but be home for lunch. We'll leave then."

She grabbed my dishes and took them to the sink. "Go ahead," she said. "I have a lot to get done." I turned and ran out the door, the hiss of water and the clatter of dishes fading behind me.

When I came home at noon, I could hear Mom's feet thudding across the floor above me. "Mom?" I called, heading toward the stairs.

Her voice met me when I was halfway up them. "Hey, kiddo! I'm in the bedroom. Come up and help me carry these things."

She was in the bedroom sitting on an overflowing suitcase. My father's side of the closet was empty.

"Come here," Mom said. "I'm just trying to get these things to shut." Together we stuffed and sat and zipped until all that was left were a couple of old ties lying in puddles on the floor. Mom shoved them out of the way with her foot. "He hates those," she said. "We'll throw them away." She looked around the room, her eyes lingering on the full suitcases that sat in the middle of the bare floor. "I think we're about done here." She sucked on her lip, then nodded firmly. "Yep. We're done. You ready?"

I shrugged.

"Let's get. Time to take the Bolt Box for another ride."

Normally I liked the Buick, but today everything seemed bad.

"Why do we have to take the Buick?" I whined as I followed her down the stairs. "Its radio doesn't work."

Mom rolled her eyes at me. "Poor little you," she said. "Having to drive in a car with just your boring old mom to listen to. How tough."

I ignored her. "Dad's car has a radio," I said. "Dad's car has everything."

I bumped into Mom's back as she stopped on the stairs. "You're right," she said after a minute. "It would be nice to take the Stratus on such a long trip." She dug in her pocket for her car keys. "Go unlock the Buick," she said as she handed them to me. "I'll be right down." She turned and ran back up the stairs. A few minutes later she appeared at the front door, dragging both bulging suitcases behind her. She grunted as she swung the battered suitcase into the Buick. It hit the seat with a smack, and she slapped her hands together before lifting the second one. It too slammed against the upholstery as she flung it into the car. "Climb in," she said. "We've got a few more errands to run."

Dad's office was tall and shiny. The sun glinted off it and stung my eyes as I peered up, trying to guess which window was Dad's. I blocked my eyes against the sun and turned to Mom. "Are we meeting Dad for lunch before we go?"

"Just dropping something off. I'm pretty sure Dad's busy for lunch."

"How do you know?" I asked. "We could just ask."

She sighed. "Believe me," she said. "There are some things a mom just knows." She pulled the key from the ignition and held it up against the light.

"You know, this was our very first car," she said. "We used to take you for rides in it on Sunday afternoons. You loved those rides." She was silent for a moment. "We all did."

A ray of sunlight splintered on the edge of the key. "Oh well." She grabbed the car door handle and yanked on it. "It's a rusty piece of junk now. Come on, let's just make this quick. Lock it," she added as I opened the car door to follow her. She popped the trunk and pulled the overnight case out of it. "Go put this in the Stratus," she said. "It's time to change cars, and then we have more things to take care of."

While we waited in the lobby of the bank, I grabbed three suckers and twirled one of them in my mouth. Its stickiness formed peeling layers on the inside of my cheeks, and I sucked them clean while Mom murmured something to the teller.

"All of it, ma'am?" he asked as he pushed a stack of papers toward my mother.

"Yes." Mom signed quickly. "Close the account completely, and split it in half between two different envelopes, please."

I stared as the clerk counted bills onto the counter. He counted thirty-four of them, and Mom had him put seventeen in each envelope. She shoved them into her purse and zipped it shut, clutching it to her stomach as we left the bank. We were back at the house quickly, and she cut the motor, letting the car fall silent in the summer afternoon. "Don't worry," she said as she stared up at the house. "We'll be back soon. We're only going away for the weekend."

In the house, she grabbed a pen and began to scrawl something on a sheet of paper. "Would you get me a baggie, babe?" She didn't look up from her writing.

When I returned she was folding the note, matching its edges and pleating its creases with the hard flat of her thumbnail. I gave the baggie to her, and she folded the envelope and slid it in. She pinched the corner of the note between her fingers and held it, hesitating,

above the open bag. She opened it and reread it, picking up the pen and holding it poised above the paper. At last she dropped the pen and crumpled the note between her hands, tossing the unsealed bag on the table. "Come on," she said. "Let's just get out of here." She walked out the door and left me standing in the kitchen.

I stared at the room around me. It felt dim and muted without her there. I shivered. I missed Dad. I missed Mom. I missed having Mom and Dad together. Outside, I heard the car start. I knew Mom would wait a few minutes before giving the horn a light beep to remind me she was out there. I lifted the bag from the table and pulled the envelope out. The pen was still lying on the table, and I grabbed it, holding it above the envelope just as Mom had done. I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say much. "To Dad, I love you," I wrote. I put the envelope back in the bag and flattened the air out of it. I pressed on the zipper until I felt the pop that meant it had sealed shut. The bills slipped against each other roughly, hanging heavily in the bottom of the bag. I put the baggie into the slot in the top of the memo box. It was too tight, so I pushed harder, and the baggie disappeared into the box with a pop, thumping as it hit the bottom of the box. My hand hovered above the slot, then slid across the box's surface to where the flags perched. "I'll see you, Dad," I murmured, and I raised his flag. I turned and trudged away from him, outside toward Mom.

## The Mesa

OLIVER WELCH

I lay on the cold floor right above the wheels, which amplified the road's vibration in my skull. I swallowed hard. My mouth was dry. My throat ached from leading the Maori war chant night after night. It was like the soreness after intense physical labor, when your muscles scream if you move them out of their natural place. Thirteen days of the fifteen-day trip were gone. After you ride a bus for that long, every second feels like an eternity, but every hour flies past like the sage and caliche outside the water-stained window. Wrappers and old chips rustled as I shifted my feet. My eyes stung when I closed them. The bus had once been alive with excitement, ambition, and good intentions. Now we were all content to lose ourselves in the drone of the air conditioner and the cold windows against our foreheads.

Before the trip, I had envisioned throngs of little Indians with tears in their eyes, wondering out loud if they too could go to college. I was convinced I would then come home, satisfied that we had changed the world—that we had accomplished what all other missionaries, philanthropists, and government agencies had failed to do. Instead, we met apathy carved into stone faces and heads bowed to stare at mud-stained canvas shoes. I kept remembering the first school we had performed at in Montezuma Creek—muddy brown Navajo children on a dirty gym floor gawking at our costumes and giggling at the dances, the war chants, the hulas. The conviction behind our voices as we charged them: "Go to college! Get an education!" But as the days went on, the schools and the students all started to look the same. Usually, the students wore black, from their knitted caps down to their long jeans. I wondered how they could stand to wear dark hooded sweatshirts under the scorching Arizona sun.

For the last hour, the tour bus had been winding through hills that



now jutted into the skyline. Tin-roof adobe huts littered their tops. Kykotsmovi, Arizona, is about sixty miles southeast of Flagstaff, but it may as well be six hundred. Here, the bright oranges and blues of the southwest, made so famous by gas station postcards, were really grays and pale browns. Sagebrush was the only vegetation in sight, and there hadn't been water since the Hoover Dam. Occasionally a small gas station with a single pump sat right at the edge of the road. The elderly Indians sitting on rocking chairs and slowly turning their heads to follow the bus were the only evidence the gas stations were not completely abandoned.

In the distance was a mesa. The previous week in New Mexico, a Zuni told me that the mesas are sacred, where Indians go to talk with the Creator. This mesa was a few miles off, a solid block of sandstone reaching into the sky from a pile of rocks and dirt. As we drove by, it seemed to creep across the horizon like a large oil tanker in calm brown water. It looked like an unfinished sculpture, as if someone had started to chisel away, only to stop suddenly. Its top lay crooked against the skyline, and giant cracks ran down its sides. I could make out black streaks where metals in the rock had leached and oxidized into desert varnish.

"We're here," someone said through a yawn. I saw a chapel in the distance.

This was how we did things: Eat at the church, perform a show at the local school, and sleep at a church member's house. I found it intriguing in the beginning, but slowly all the chapels melted into one, and all the locals told the same story. The Kykotsmovi chapel was just another boulder dotting the dusty valley, slightly larger than a trailer park home. Only a few old pickup trucks were parked in the lot, a dog seated in the back of every one. The dogs, like the trucks, all seemed secondhand. Their blood-shot eyes were half shut. In place of a lawn, smooth round rocks had been meticulously placed side by side surrounding a rust-stained pole with a flapping American flag on top. Weeds grew through the cracks between the stones. The outside of the church was stucco, and it looked like the architect had intended to match the building color with the surrounding landscape, but

either the building or the earth had changed over time because they didn't seem to match now.

I stepped off the bus and swallowed. My throat was still scratchy from the previous night at Flagstaff where I had strained my voice yelling to reach everyone in the large civic center filled to capacity. I clenched my teeth, grinding sand left by the never-ending winds of the reservation. As I entered the church with a few of the other dancers, I was surprised to see that it was larger than its exterior showed. The floor creaked under our feet. The pulpit rested on a card table. The wood floor around the pulpit was footworn and cracked. Four rows of metal folding chairs faced the front, and a mobile chalkboard sat off to the side, its corner missing.

"Welcome to Hopi land," said a soft voice. "I am Sister Canyon." The words crept along at a slow but steady pace, monotonic but with a sweet humility that made the voice unmistakably Indian. I turned to see a short, round woman with dark glasses and long black braided hair hanging over her shoulder. She wore a large blue shirt and green sweatpants. Turquoise stones embedded in silver dangled from her earlobes, and beads strung together with dried juniper berries hung from her neck. She held a tray of rolls. The tops shone with butter.

"Thank you," I said, trying to mask the exhaustion in my voice. "Can I get some of the guys to help you with those?"

"No, no," she chuckled. She smiled, showing large teeth plated with gold fillings. "You are our guests." She hurried into the next room to place the rolls by the salad.

I motioned for the rest of the group to follow her. I was startled by yet another voice. Loud and commanding.

"Well, hello there, boys!" said a man scuttling across the floor, holding a large Crockpot with two giant oven mitts. A white man in his sixties, hair light gray in a flat-top military cut. He smiled, his face tight from the weight he was carrying. He wore a fat tie on a clean white shirt tucked into a pair of blue jeans, the mark of a missionary on the reservation. Seeing a white man, I felt a slight sense of relief. He looked clean and civilized in the rough wilderness. He was a reminder that not too far away was the modern world we had left behind.

"Would you mind helping the missus?" he said as he hurried past. I looked over to see a woman struggling to open the church door while carrying a light green Tupperware bowl. She seemed more out of place than the group of dirty college students. Her dress was bright orange and red with large tropical flowers. She wore big hoop earrings and at least one ring on each finger. A large smile pushed folds of skin up under her eyes as we rushed over to open the door.

"Thank you, dears," she said between breaths. "There's some more in the back of the van if you wouldn't mind."

We set all the food around the giant metal cauldron of steaming spaghetti noodles and gathered around the table. The meal was an interesting mess of culture. Fresh fry bread sizzled next to pasta salad, and the smell of mutton mixed with the scent of green bean casserole. The old missionary blessed the food. The only thing on my mind was getting enough food into my stomach to keep me going one more night. The wait was painful. The girls always had to take a little bit of everything, making sure the globs of *Jell-O* and potato salad didn't touch.

I had decided at the beginning of the trip to get to know as many reservation people as possible. I was determined to sit down by the locals and make conversation during mealtimes. At the very least, I thought, I could say I met this goal. It had started out easy enough, but as the days went on, the food got more interesting and the conversation less so. But I piled my plate with food and scanned the room for my victim. A group of teenage girls sat in the corner giggling with their teeth clenched around chunks of meat and bread. Going over there would only send them into a frenzy of more giggling. I looked to the opposite end of the chapel and noticed an old man hunched over his plate. He didn't look like he would offer up much conversation—maybe he wouldn't even notice me.

He was antique and frail. A black meshback truckstop hat balanced on his head. The hat had dark red mud stains on the front, but the words "Tuba City Feed and Supply" were still visible. The mesh showed his thinning hair and bronze scalp. His eyes were almond shaped and deep sunken, yellow with spider webs of pink veins. He

seemed to be straining to stare at nothing. He had a broad nose, slightly swollen in the middle but flat otherwise, with large pores. He slowly shoveled mashed potatoes into his mouth. His thin lips were permanently turned downward as if they had grown tired of holding themselves up throughout the years, and his jaw was broad and square, a Hopi jaw. He wore a frayed GI field jacket with large white paint stains. Its name patch said, "Tuwa." The jacket looked too heavy for him to carry around.

"Is it all right if I sit here?" I asked, not knowing if he understood English. He looked up and opened his mouth as if to say something. Instead he let out a wheeze as he nodded.

"Do you attend church here?" I asked as a test to see if I would have to make conversation at all.

"Yep," he said. The word rested on top of the air he pushed out of his lungs.

"My name is Sam," I said, articulating every word. "What is your name?" I expected him to reply with a proud Indian title.

"Stan Tuwa." His voice was raspy.

"So, did you serve in the Army?"

Stan put down his fork and searched his jacket with a trembling index finger crossed with bulging green veins. He found the name patch as if it were the first time he had ever had to locate it. He looked at me, his finger still on the patch.

"World War Two," he said. "I served the United States of America in the Army." He looked at me until I spoke.

"That's great," I said, and continued eating. Stan picked up his fork and did the same. After a few bites, I decided to try to get him talking again.

"So, what do you like to do around here, Stan?" I asked.

He looked at me. Maybe people his age didn't do anything. I reworded my question to make it easier.

"What did you do last weekend?" I asked.

Stan paused, looking up slightly and squinting. His lips drooped down to their natural position. He blinked as he opened and closed

his mouth several times. "Two boys ran off the mesa," he said. He looked at me again.

"Really?" I asked half-heartedly. "Ran off the mesa." I felt the slightest curiosity and wanted to press the old man. I looked around and saw that everyone else was finishing their meal and cleaning up.

He took a spoonful of corn and brought it to his mouth. "I had to clean 'em up on Saturday," he said as he closed his mouth around the plastic spoon. "Ran right off the mesa and their heads came open. Had to clean 'em off the rocks on Saturday."

The food in my mouth became a bland paste. My ears got hot but the rest of my body was cold. I looked up at the old man, who was chewing and staring again at nothing.

"Why?" I swallowed. "Why did they do that?"

"They were angry. Sometimes the boys and girls get mad at the reservation. They get mad at the Hopi way. Sometimes they drink and run off the mesa."

Stan continued to eat. I looked down at his food. Giggling erupted from the girls in the corner. The metal chairs clanged as they were being put away.

"Two boys ran off the mesa," Stan repeated. "I cleaned the blood off the rocks on Saturday."

I couldn't finish my meal. Not until I was scraping my plate off did I realize I hadn't said goodbye to Stan Tuwa. Next to the garbage can, the elderly female missionary and her husband cleaned up the remains of the meal.

"Did you hear about the kids that died at the mesa last weekend?" I asked with an urgency that startled both the woman and me.

"Oh, dear, yes," she said, cocking her head and exaggerating a frown.

"Well," I said, expecting her to go on. "What did you—I mean, does this happen a lot?"

"It's terrible. Just terrible." She continued wiping the table. "The poor dears just get so sad sometimes. It's not their fault, and it's not fair, the poor dears."

"They have every opportunity a white man does," her husband

said, and pointed at his wife, clenching the dirty gray rag with the same hand.

We got back on the bus to ride to the civic center. Despite the noise, I felt numb. I could not move. A crude fence lined both sides of the road. It looked like it was made of driftwood and barbed wire. The sun dipped below the red dirt and brown hills and the mesa where the Hopi talk to their Gods.

## Two Things

RUSS BECK

Before I hit puberty, my Sunday School teacher told me that if I knew two things about everyone and everything in the Bible, I would get into heaven. These are the things that Saint Peter asks. I've compiled loads of lists in my head. Jesus: (1) Son of Mary and (2) sometimes son of Joseph and sometimes not. King Solomon: (1) big golden temple and (2) wanted to cut up babies. Abram/Abraham: (1) dug stars and (2) almost killed his son because God commanded it. Peter: (1) liked Jesus all but three times and (2) cut a guy's ear off.

About the town I live in: (1) the whole town is on the national historic registry. Nobody knows what that means. And (2) my great-great-granddad helped settle it in the late 1800s as a Danish settlement for recent Mormon converts. Two things the town knows about me: (1) a year into my Mormon mission I came home for a gallbladder surgery and didn't go back. And (2) in the third grade, while playing Little League baseball, Peter Christensen threw a ball that hit me in the ear. I can't hear out of it, and it is swollen, like a wrestler's. Two things that the town doesn't know about me: (1) I not only could have gone back on my mission after the surgery but was nearly forced to. And (2) the girl who sleeps next to me breathes through her nose while she sleeps, producing a rhythmic white-noise whistle that I can't sleep without anymore.

The alarm clock rings and Audrey reaches over to press snooze. Fourth time this morning. I turn and let my legs dangle off the bed and push my eyes, hoping it will be enough to wake me up.

"What time is it?"

"7:14." Audrey is awake and reading.

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Honorable Mention, 2006 *Irreantum* Fiction Contest

Audrey watches me stumble to the folding chair covered in clothes and her pamphlets. Seventh-day Adventists. Scientologists. Sikhs. Buddhists. Unitarians. Jesuits. Nazarenes. Jehovah's Witnesses. Separatists. Calvinists. Presbyterians. Audrey didn't have any order in her religious interests, just tangled nests. About Audrey: (1) her father was a Baptist minister who didn't believe in God. She hasn't discounted Him/Her/It/Them completely, but she seems to be systematically checking them off, one by one, like a shopping list. And (2) she says if we don't start having sex, she is going to need to take sedatives to help her sleep.

I pull on a faded T-shirt advertising The Spoon with their slogan *Like Home Cookin' and that ain't no Foolin'.* Audrey sees I'm close to leaving. She gets out of bed, wrapping herself in a comforter that dwarfs her small body. She walks on her tiptoes and stands behind me and tucks in my shirt, which I will untuck as soon as I leave the house. This, like many things, has become a routine morning thing.

"Hey, I forgot to tell you the missionaries are coming over tonight. I got a new calling in the ward. I'm the ward mission leader. So if you could—well, can you not be here tonight?" I try to smile.

"Yeah," Audrey sighs, and clicks her tongue. "I don't know where I'll go. The library closes at five. And I can't go back to my apartment because I got evicted."

"What? When did that happen?" I laugh but don't mean it.

"Two weeks ago. I've been meaning to tell you, but . . ."

"Where have you been staying?"

"Here."

"Really? Where is your stuff?" I throw my arms out and realize that most of her stuff is here. She even hung up her crucified Curious George clock; his hands spin to point out the time. I also remember seeing her bras and panties and some stray T-shirts in a drawer that I used to keep my school papers in.

"Most of it is in the loft. I didn't tell you because I knew you would be pissed."

"We're going to have to find you a place."

"That's it though. I have a place."



"You know I would like that." I put my hand through my thinning hair. "But I can't."

"Why not?"

"You know why not. What? What do I tell the bishop? What do I tell my mom?"

"What have you been telling them?"

"Nothing."

"That seems to work."

"Damn it," I say with no voice, looking at the Curious George clock. "I have to go." I lean over and graze her cheek with my lips, another routine that we have developed since we haven't been living together. She sits on the bed, parting her pamphlets with her toes.

I walk outside to see clouds polishing the mountains. It feels like rain. I open the door to my truck, making the smell of alfalfa, sweat and decay circulate. About my truck: (1) my father bought it from the Forest Service, and it is therefore crayon green with rust poking through like liver spots, and (2) the steering wheel is only straight when I'm turning at a forty-five-degree angle.

When I get to the mock-Victorian house I've been working on, I notice that Jack is already on the top turret: not painting but drinking. This is a good thing. He might not notice that I am late. Jack packs one sweating paint can with ice in Ziploc bags and PBRs. He thinks people won't catch on to something so clever. About Jack: (1) he is the best house painter in the county, especially the old ones; he gives himself a time frame and only really works the last few days on the job. He still has a week on this job and therefore doesn't work. And (2) before Jack came here he worked for the Mormon Church Educational System and wrote manuals for classes taught to 15-18-year-olds.

Laughing, I get out of the truck and look at Jack.

"Where the hell have you been?" Jack yells down without looking at me. He did notice the time.

"Where do you want me to start?" I squint up to see Jack. Jack's beard seems to grow faster on his neck than on the rest of his face, giving him a strange lion-look.

"Go ahead and start on the east side."

I know this is because I wouldn't be able see Jack working, but I don't say anything. I like to work on my own. The house has a large turret facing west (the one that Jack worked on) and two in the back that are smaller and with higher pitches. I start on one of the small turrets. The sun slowly warms my back through my thin T-shirt; I inhale paint fumes mixed with the morning's humidity and realize I've never enjoyed a job more. Letting paint splatter on my arms in the morning and taking it off in the evening to expose lighter patches. The danger of the height but the security of the ladder and the guide ropes. Looking at my hands and seeing calluses instead of just one (nearly gone now) writer's bump. I love—as much as anyone can—Jack, who's only agreeable after twenty-four ounces.

I sand all morning and only finish one turret when Jack comes back to inspect my work.

Pulling off his baseball cap, he yells, "Looks good. You red for lunch?"

We get in Jack's van that says in rusting letters, "*Jack of all Trades*," even though he only paints houses. I'm a little nervous to let Jack drive buzzed, but most of the time he seems more alert intoxicated. The van smells of Blue Ribbons and paint thinner. Luckily The Spoon is only a few blocks away. About The Spoon: (1) it's right downtown (downtown consists of the post office across the street and the gas station just north of The Spoon) and used to be a welfare office for the Mormon Church. And (2) a collection of bad Mormons keeps it in business. Instead of going to church like many of them did at one time, they come here. The only time The Spoon is wall-to-wall is on a Sunday morning. Jack and I arrive at the same time as Audrey. She must have the lunch shift today. We step out of the van and walk to the diner behind her.

Jack whispers loud, "Sweet ass she's got, isn't it."

I pretend not to hear him. Audrey walks with a little more swagger and bobs her head—she is laughing. She does look great: especially in her mint-green short skirt and top that she is forced to wear when she waits tables.

Jack and I walk in the diner, making the bell above the door ring;

before Jack can sit at the counter, he announces to the fifteen-odd patrons that he wants coffee—black and fast. We sit with the window behind us to face the rest of the diner. Audrey walks to the hinged counter and flips it open. She brings mugs and sets them in front of Jack and me.

"No coffee for me today, ma'am," I say, looking at the marble-Formica counter.

"Oh. Sorry. I always forget," she says dryly.

"It's okay."

"You still going to church?" Jack says, and I swear I hear silverware drop to tabletops.

"Course I am, Jack," I say loudly.

"Sorry."

I think for once this might be a genuine apology. Jack pauses to look at his lap. "It just seems that you get more done on Sundays than I do anymore."

"Our meetings were moved to the morning. I have all afternoon free."

"But you're still not supposed to work; you don't have to, you know." He drinks his coffee in heaving gulps.

"I know. Thanks, Jack."

Audrey brings us the special of the day without asking for an order; it's what we get whether we want it or not. Today it's Shepard's pie. We want it. Audrey says nothing, only slides our food with silverware on napkins. She goes back to leaning against the coffee maker and reading her dog-eared copy of the Upanishads. She has a pen that she twirls around her thumb and drums once on the counter then repeats—a strange system that obviously took some time to develop.

The only time that Jack doesn't talk is when he eats. His mouth slaps open and shut like a dog's jaws snapping chicken bones. He finishes his food long before I do because I carefully pile everything onto the back of my fork with my knife. Shepard's pie is perfect for this, and I relish eating it.

Audrey comes over with a sweating water pitcher, clears Jack's

plate, fills my glass, leaning over to expose her cleavage and letting her Star of David necklace dance between her breasts. She leans a little closer to me and winks. I shake my head derisively and look at Jack to see if he notices. He does. Audrey swaggers back to her Upanishads.

"Man, I think she likes you." Jack betrays his age and acts like the horny teenagers he once taught Jesus to.

"Maybe?"

Jack stands up and beckons to Audrey. She blusters over to us.

"Yes?" she says, letting her bottom lip pout.

"My friend here . . ."

"Stop, Jack," I say coldly, then turn to Audrey, smiling. "You'll have to excuse him, he's been, you know." I put my thumb and pinky out and mime drinking.

"No, it's okay; let him talk." Audrey secures her hair behind her ears and folds her arms across her breasts. I look at my shoes.

"Well, you see, uh, Miss, we have been coming in here for, you know, about the last year, and my friend here might have a little crush on you. You understand." I begin to walk for the door, but Jack backs up and pins me against the window. "Would you consider going out with him sometime, that's all I'm asking."

"I would, but your friend would have to ask." She looks at me, raises her left eyebrow, and draws her mouth into a period.

"I'm real busy this week, maybe next week? Would that be . . ." I cock my head sideways and let my words fall out like used-up chaw. Then I look to Audrey, who lets her arms drop as she turns to walk into the kitchen. I break past Jack and make it out the door.

"Sorry, Jack, I guess I get a little embarrassed." I walk a full five steps ahead of him. Jack wants to prod, I'm sure, but he doesn't.

On the way back to the house, the threatening clouds burst, making work impossible for the rest of the day. I drive home while the rain increases my truck's liver spots.

When I get home I go directly to the loft to see how much of Audrey's stuff I will have to move later. I had no idea she had so many things. On the ribs of the attic, she has hung various religious lead-

ers: Confucius, Bob Marley, L. Ron Hubbard, European Jesus, Black Jesus, Latin Jesus, and Indian Jesus. I find a trunk labeled "Jesus." In it she has an action figure of Jesus that, when a button is pushed on his back, his hand cranks up to "blessing mode"; four pieces of the Original Cross (all different kinds of wood and labeled with purple post-it notes); and some crucifixes with effigies of Jesus and some without. I find an autographed ticket stub of Jim Bakker's traveling/healing show and a tube of mascara.

She has more trunks filled with books and other religious artifacts. It looks more like the contents of an archeological dig than someone's possessions. I spend the next few hours sifting through her collection and eventually fall asleep looking up into the rafters lying on wood planks, grasping dolls of Buddha and Shiva.

I don't sleep long, and when I wake it's to the sound of people at the door. I stumble from the attic and down the stairs to see the back of Audrey's head bounce around the corner and open the door. Standing on the doorstep are two men dressed in black suits, drenched. Two things about the missionaries: (1) Both are pretty new to this area where deadbeat missionaries are sent because not much damage can be done. And (2) I've got nothing. They seem perfectly defined by number one.

One missionary is plump and is currently testing the strength of the thread that holds on to the last button of his suit coat. He smiles, but he shouldn't. He is Elder Pollard from Birmingham, England. The other is Elder Elkington. He has black hair that would be slick even if it weren't wet. He is thin and from New Zealand and claims to be a rugby player, but Audrey could probably take him.

Pollard can't stop staring at Audrey's breasts and does little to hide this.

"Hello, boys." Audrey smiles and steps out in the rain to welcome them inside the house. She attempts to help Pollard with his coat as he crosses the threshold. Because I was a missionary, I know that this will be the highlight of Pollard's week. Physical touch by any woman is good, but one who looks like Audrey? He will call his supervisors

not with stories about how many people he taught but about Audrey helping him with his coat. I laugh. Pollard's eyebrows almost disappear under his bangs, and he is slightly balding.

"Come in, come in." Audrey takes their coats and lays them over the radiator and offers them a hot drink.

"Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you. My friend was interested in coming over and talking to you tonight—hope you don't mind?" I say still standing on the last step of the stairs.

"Course not." Pollard is a chronic mouth breather—although I'm a good five feet away, I can smell his breath.

"Great! I'm going to help Audrey in the kitchen." I grab Audrey, who is still fiddling with their coats, and lead her into the kitchen.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm interested in the church."

"Then ask *me* questions."

"I do."

She's right. I never can answer her questions because they make me feel hypocritical.

"So what's our story?"

"Story?"

"Yeah. Why are you here?"

"Because I want to learn about the church."

"Right. Right. But how do you know me?"

"I waited on you in the diner."

"That's good. It will work."

"Hey. It's all true. How about that?" she mumbles.

I can hear Pollard sitting down in the next room. The couch and his body protest.

"Remember, just act calm."

Audrey winks and gives me a surly thumbs-up.

She is already talking when she enters the front room, "So, are you guys hungry? We could probably fix something up for you to eat."

It turns out that the only thing we have that will feed us all are salad fixings. Audrey cuts up cucumbers and carrots while I tear lettuce. I worry that she looks a little too natural in the kitchen. I watch

Pollard, who watches her work, to see if he suspects anything. He is an eerie shadow of her that says nothing. Elkington turns on the TV in the other room and flips through some magazines sitting on the coffee table.

When we eat, Pollard picks at the salad and finally asks for a dressing, which he drowns the greens in. Elkington eats everything in the salad in an order. He starts with the lettuce, then the carrots, then the cucumbers, and finishes with the apples. When we finish we go back to the front room. Audrey and I sit on the love seat and the two missionaries sit on the other two chairs.

"So how does this work? Do you guys have lesson plans? Do I just ask questions? What's the lowdown?" Audrey asks.

Pollard is caught off guard.

"Well, yeah, the fing is . . . we do a little of both." He looks at me, hoping that I will jump in. I don't. "Let's start with what you know about the church . . . sowhatdoyouknow?"

"Well, it started back east, right? New York? It was founded by a farmboy named John Smith."

"Joseph Smith," Elkington says triumphantly. It's the first thing he has said all night.

"That's right. Sorry. Well, he was looking to get churchy and asked God. God told him all the churches were crap and gave him a hat that allowed him to see ancient writings and treasure locations . . . wait, that comes later . . . right?"

Elder Elkington nods and Pollard's expression is almost completely erased.

"Magic 'at?" Pollard finally asks.

"Yup? Isn't that right?"

"You'll have to excuse us," I say, and pull Audrey up. As we walk toward the kitchen, she puts her hand in mine.

"What the hell? What are you trying to do?"

"What?"

"Where did you learn all that stuff?"

"Your books. Some Baptist pamphlets . . . I don't think they like you very much at all."

"Is this what I get for not paying the cable bill?"

"I'm interested in your church. I don't think that its origins are more ridiculous than any other church."

"You already know more than most in the church. Why do you need them?"

"I don't know their part. I don't know why they are in the church. Everyone takes and refuses different things. You, for example, you leave much more than you—"

"So is that why you're here? Am I your case study?" I didn't realize I was angry until I heard it in my voice.

"What if I said yes, what would you say? It's no worse than what you are doing to me. You hide me all day. Embarrass me if we see each other in public. How do you think that makes me feel?"

"Better than being someone's science project."

"You're such an asshole. The only interest I have in you is, sadly, *you*."

The front door clicks shut.

Audrey slips past me and hits the bathroom door open. I go outside to try to catch the missionaries, but they are already out of shouting distance. It's still raining. The gutters are just on the verge of overflowing. I can't bear to go back in to Audrey, so I go to my truck and watch lightning arc over alfalfa fields.

I wake up when the rain stops. It's morning and everything looks drenched. I still can't go inside, so I step out of the truck, pee, and get back in and drive to work.

I know I'm early because Jack isn't here. As I walk across the lawn to find the ladders that Jack has stashed in the bushes, I feel my feet sink into the ground. I lean the ladder against the house and climb. About halfway up, I feel the ladder legs dig into the ground, then one side more than the other. I feel my center of gravity shift, and before I can correct myself, I begin to fall. I land on my back. Luckily the ground is soft, but the ladder falls on top of me. I hear a snap and reach for my shoulder but can't move my arm. I lean over to throw up, and black out.

I wake up in a hospital bed. Jack sits with his feet up, reading a *Wom-*



*an's Digest.* I can see and smell dog foul on the bottom of his shoes.

"Drugs must be good," Jack says, without looking at me.

I don't respond because I can't seem to find my voice.

"If they weren't, you would probably be screaming right now."

"How bad is it?" I can speak; it just takes more concentration than usual.

"Broken collarbone, minor head trauma . . . you'll live. You'll probably leave the hospital today. Called your house today to say that it's unsafe to paint with lightning threatening. The missus said you had already left."

I can't talk again.

"She came by earlier. Said she'd be back."

"So I guess you . . . know? About her?"

"Sheeit, who doesn't? After the missionaries left your house, they went to the Paulsons'. You know something that juicy travels faster than squash in season. But I've known for weeks now."

"Yeah? I thought you might. Why didn't you say anything?" I'm conscious of the tips of my ears.

"Seemed like you didn't want me to know. Dunno."

"Thanks."

"Listen. You know why I came down here?"

"To the hospital? I guess to check on your capital."

"No, down *here* here." He pauses. The room fills with gravity. "My stake president up in Salt Lake came to my house to offer me a calling while I was drunk." His face looks stretched. "He called me into his office that week to have a chat. He tried to make small talk but it didn't last. Then he asked me if I was trying to hit rock bottom—if that was my goal." Jack stops and waits. Just when I didn't think he was going to go on, he starts up again, beginning with a cough. "I thought about it for a while and finally said, 'Yeah, that's my goal, 'cause at least then I'll know that there is something above rock bottom.'" He stands up and looks out a window I didn't know I had. "I'm still trying to hit that bottom. I ain't found it yet."

I hear someone at the door. It's Audrey. She's wearing one of my T-shirts and shifting back and forth.

"Hey, stranger. How you feeling?"

"I—I'm not sure." Audrey puts her arm around Jack and gives him a half hug. "You two have met, then . . . I mean you've talked about other things besides daily specials."

"Yeah, a little." Audrey is boiling. She moves to the bedside but can't keep the boundary. She crawls in bed next to me, putting one hand across my stomach and the other through my hair. "Is this okay?"

At first I think she's asking if it's okay that she is in bed with me in front of Jack, but I realize that she is asking if she is hurting me.

"You're fine."

Audrey tells me that she has found another place to live (I find out later it is with Jack). I go home wearing an awkward brace, and Audrey makes tofu-chicken soup.

Later that week I decide to go for a walk. Just like any other day, everyone driving by waves hello. While still in the hospital and on morphine, I decided that I needed one of those big awakenings. I needed to figure everything out. I wanted it to happen outside the church sitting under a cottonwood. I wanted to see lighting hitting the steeple or the clouds parting to illuminate a window. But when I get to the church, I can't stop. It's a clear day; nothing dramatic happens on clear days. I buy a Coke at the gas station downtown and turn around. I look in the big window at The Spoon to see Audrey leaning against the coffee maker with a book and a pen. She smiles, flips me off, and laughs. I try to think of something clever to do but only smile.

Two things that the town knows about me: (1) I fell twenty feet. And (2) the bishop is going to come and see me soon.

## Outside

SHAWN P. BAILEY

I still wash dishes nights at the Village Inn. My girlfriend, Angie, likes the free pie. She thinks I'm working two jobs now. That's my fault because I didn't fix a misunderstanding when it got started. I feel bad about lying to her. On the other hand, I figure I am already going to hell for living with Angie without us being married.

I guess I lied about something else too: I never actually worked as an assistant to a landscape architect. I made all that up because of the new temple. For about a year now, I have been watching it come together. Once or twice a week, I would take a slow drive down Bountiful Boulevard to see what I could. Sometimes I stopped and checked out the view from the fence. About a week ago, I got talking to a guy on the inside. I fed him this story about me and a landscape architect and asked if they needed any volunteers.

Now I work mornings with a crew of Mexicans in matching purple T-shirts. They are not volunteers. Their boss pays them cash every Friday afternoon. They tell me where to dig my holes and what trees and shrubs go where.

I have never seen the inside of a temple. I had a chance to do baptisms for the dead when I was in high school. I blew it off. I once saw a picture of the pool where they do it. There was a sculpture of bulls in a circle with the pool up on their backs. I see those bulls in my dreams sometimes. I get all freaked out and I can't sleep because of how they watch me with their big blank eyes.

The dedication is in a few months. Then they'll start checking "recommendations" at the door to keep people like me out. There is an open house before that. I am going to be there at the front of the line.

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Third Place, 2008 *Irreantum* Fiction Contest

Some afternoons we get a group of high school kids doing "service." One or two of them actually does some work. The rest loaf around and crack dirty jokes and act like they don't care. That was me a few years ago. I wish I could go back. For one thing I know better jokes now. I would tell them not to be so stupid. *Live it up while you still can*, I would say. And *you don't realize how much you can get away with at your age. Responsibility sucks! Just look at me.*

It is eleven o'clock. I am working in a big planter box on the mountainside, planting little yellow shrubs. I stop digging and pull off my gloves. I put my back against the wall. I get some shade, but the toes of my boots are still out in the sun.

Today I have been working with this skinny guy who can't stop smiling. He has really big teeth. First thing this morning he comes right up to me and grabs my hand and pumps it until it hurts. He tells me his name, which I forget instantly. His face is basically grey. I keep to myself at first. I watch him out of the corner of my eye. His face goes beet red after about fifteen minutes of getting his butt kicked by a shovel.

"You better get yourself a good bottle of sunscreen," I say.

He says he already has SPF 60 on.

I say he is a liar because they don't even make SPF that high.

Three hours later, I try again to strike up a conversation with this guy. "You ever seen a shovel before today?"

He looks at his feet.

"I'm just kidding," I say. "Don't start crying or something."

"You're right." He shows me the palm of his right hand. "I'm working on a set of brand-new calluses." He has a blister. It is red like his face.

"You need gloves, dude." I hold mine out to him. I am relieved when he doesn't take them. "What's your name again?"

"Steve."

"You coming back tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"Get yourself some gloves."

The next day he shows up with bright green and yellow gloves.

Suede, I think. They are way too small. If he didn't get them from his mom, then he got them from his grandma.

Steve works in spurts. He sits down a lot. I shouldn't let it bother me. He is a volunteer like me, and that means he doesn't have to be here at all. But I guess I can't stand somebody sitting there watching me work. On one of his breaks, he pulls a book out of his backpack and starts reading.

"I guess hard work and you just don't mix?"

His face goes hard. He stuffs his book in his bag and walks over to me.

"No big deal," I say. "Keep reading if you want."

"Sorry."

"Maybe you could volunteer indoors somewhere."

"Come on." He bends over and grabs a little tree by the trunk. I stand back and watch him for a change. He tries to put it in a hole I just dug. He loses his balance, and his foot sinks to the bottom of the hole. The tree falls on top of his foot, pinning him.

"Flip!" he curses. "*Fucking crap!*"

"You all right?"

"Get it off!" He bends over to pull on it.

I go toward him. I accidentally see down the neck of his shirt. I see what looks like about twenty leeches hanging from his chest and stomach. Some kind of tumors or sores or something. I feel my face go all contorted. I swallow hard to push back the taste of bile.

He sees me looking at him. He blocks my view down his shirt with a green and yellow glove at his throat.

I bend over and pull the tree off his foot. I reach my hand out to help him out of the hole. He glares at me and gets himself out.

I don't say anything to Steve for the rest of the day. I don't even look him in the face. Steve doesn't take any more breaks. Other than that, he is the same: always smiling. Now his huge teeth make me think of the weird flaps of brown skin under his shirt.

The next morning, Steve doesn't take any breaks again. He keeps going even when I sit and take a drink of water.

"Steve. Take a break, buddy."

"I'm fine."

"What are you reading anyway?"

"Don't treat me different because—"

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Because what?" I guess I am curious about what I saw.

"I don't want to talk about it. Mind your own—"

"You got cancer?" It just slips out.

"Yeah. That's all you need to know. I'm fine, all right?"

"Fine."

Me and Steve work together for the next week or so without saying much. The only thing I want to ask him about is off limits. I decide he doesn't like me much anyway, so I don't bother him. That's why I'm kind of shocked when he asks me to come to Sunday dinner with his family.

He gives me the address on a slip of paper. "It's close," he says, pointing south and east. "You ever been to Mueller Park?"

I get kind of psyched out pulling my little pickup into Steve's driveway. Steve's house is big. Red brick and columns and a separate garage back behind. I expect a butler or a maid at the door. It is only Steve. He is completely bald. The thin blond hair that sticks out from his hat at the temple must be a wig or something.

Other than Steve's parents, his older brothers and sisters are there with their wives and husbands and kids. Everybody is quiet while Steve's mom questions me.

"Tell me about your family," she says.

"My mom's on her third marriage," I say. "She seems happy for her. I don't see my dad much."

"What does your father do?"

"I don't know. They probably have him doing some kind of work. Last I heard, he comes up for parole in about a year."

I kind of want them to act stuck up about me. That is plenty of bait, I think. I can't even get a smirk out of them.

"Where did you grow up?" She smiles at me.

"Layton."

"What do you study?"

"Like school? I was thinking about trade school to be a fireman."

Another lie. I don't even know where I got that one.

"Do you work? Other than at the temple?"

"Sure. Got to pay the rent and all that."

"What kind of work?"

"Washing dishes." I point west. "The Village Inn down by the freeway."

"That's enough," Steve's dad chuckles. "Interrogation over." He pats me on the back and says I need my mouth for better things than talk. The roast beef and mashed potatoes and homemade gravy *are* good. Steve's dad puts another helping on my plate.

I offer to wash the dishes after dinner. "Step aside," I say. "Let a professional take care of things."

Steve's mom acts all embarrassed. Guests *never* do the dishes, she says. *Never*. She ushers me into a room off the kitchen. Shelves of books line the walls. Overstuffed leather couches surround a big-screen TV. Steve's brother is in there watching golf. He holds a fat baby with blond curly hair. She slurps and sucks at a bottle.

I sit down by them.

"So you work at the temple with Stevie," he says.

"Yeah."

"This whole thing sucks. You know?"

"Yeah."

"I'm not good at the dignity thing. We are all hating life right now—only some of us manage to act like freaking robots."

I feel kind of stupid. I think he is probably making fun of me.

"Steve should be on his mission right now," he says.

"Really?"

"The doctor gives him a month. But that quack is a freaking atheist. I think we should fire him. Steve deserves somebody with faith!"

"Yeah."

The doorbell rings. Steve's brother gets it. He brings in a girl with long black hair. She is pretty. She has big eyes and a delicate nose.

"This is Dana," he says.

I smile at her, and she gives me a polite wave.

"Just a minute," Steve's brother says. "Let me talk to him." He goes into the kitchen. I feel awkward again. I look at her as much as I can without her noticing. I feel kind of bad about that. But like I said, she is really pretty.

Steve's brother comes back shaking his head. "I'm sorry," he says. "He just can't—see you tonight. He doesn't mean to be rude. He's just not up to it—"

"I understand," she whispers. She leaves.

"I can't deal with this," Steve's brother says.

"Yeah."

"That was Steve's girlfriend. He broke up with her, and she still wants to be sealed to him."

"Wow."

"He won't even talk to her."

"Really? She's cute."

"He's being mean on purpose because she loves him."

Silence.

"He—you know," he says. "Eventually she should fall in love with somebody else."

"Crap," I say under my breath.

"And my parents want to drop everything and travel with Steve. They would show him anything in the world. And Steve has gotten stubborn and cranky. He won't go anywhere or do anything out of the ordinary. He gets mad if somebody takes a day off work on his account."

I just sit there. I kind of want to leave.

"He just wants to work," he says. "That's where you come in. He wants to plant flowers and lay sod at the temple."

"I didn't know. I guess me and Steve don't talk much."

"Come on. You've seen a lot more of him than we have recently."

"I guess that's true." I hesitate. Then I say, "Steve is a great guy."

"Totally. A great guy. They don't make them any better."

"Yeah." I stand up and go for the kitchen.



"Good talking to you," he says. "I can see why you and Steve are friends."

The next day me and Steve are helping the Mexicans backfill sprinkler-pipe trenches. I tell him thanks for the dinner.

He doesn't say anything.

"I didn't know," I say. "One month—"

"Shut up. You don't know anything."

"You're right."

"I'm not talking about it. I don't want to see that stupid look on your face, either."

"Steve."

"No. Listen. I liked you better when you were just a belligerent redneck. At least it was honest."

"You listen. You're not *my* little brother. You're nobody to me. I won't even know it when you're gone."

"Thank you. Good. Can we work now? I've got nothing to say to you."

"Yeah. Just one thing: I don't know why you had me over for dinner last night. I don't care either. But I had a good time, and I want to return the favor if I can. I want you to let me know if I can do anything for you."

"Leave me alone? Can you leave me alone?"

"Anything. Just let me know."

"I'm really touched." He glares at me. "Are you done, Mother Theresa?"

"I won't say another word if that's how you want it."

"That's all I'm asking for."

A few days later, Steve says he thought of something I can do.

"Oh yeah?"

"I want to do something wild."

"Like what?"

"I saw your tattoo."

"What's your point?"

"I figure you would know. Show me something wild."

"Why?"

"Are you going to help me or not?"

Silence.

"You have something particular in mind?" I say.

"Beer."

"All right—"

"I mean. Just for starters."

So now me and Steve are standing here in front of the Denny's downtown waiting to catch the Fun Bus to Wendover. It's Wednesday. Almost nine a.m. Steve is clutching his stomach. He got himself all worked up about being late and wolfed down a whole plate of waffles in about twenty seconds flat.

The bus pulls up. I climb in after Steve. Me and him are the youngest people on board by at least forty years. Steve looks back at me like I already let him down. We get out of the city and past the lake. In the middle of the white desert somewhere, the bus stewardess hands out bingo cards. You get three cards for a dollar, and winners take \$15.

"Tell me this isn't wild," I say. "Illegal bingo! On a bus!"

I buy two sets of bingo cards.

"This is fun," Steve says. His eyes roll back in his head a little bit, and he pulls himself up. He staggers toward the front of the bus one row at a time.

"O-64," the bus stewardess calls out the first number.

"Bingo," some old fart says. Old ladies cackle, and old dudes guffaw.

Steve stops. Now he's clutching his mouth. He sprays his waffles all over the first three rows on the right-hand side. He retches three times. I can see little white chunks in an old lady's nest of ink-black hair.

Chaos up front in the Fun Bus. Senior citizens are up and shouting and wiping at puke all over their bingo cards and shiny track suits. Steve is pale, but completely spotless. He wipes his mouth, apologizes twice, and backs away from his victims. They scream at the bus driver until he pulls over onto the shoulder.

We all get off the bus, and the driver cleans up. Some of the old people frown at me and Steve. One lady offers him some medicine

from her purse. Another guy congratulates Steve because apparently it is good luck to gamble sick.

We get off at the first stop in Wendover: Montego Bay. Our \$12 Fun Bus tickets got us a \$10 buffet, \$7 in cash, and a free cocktail each. Steve has been hungry since about fifteen minutes after throwing up, so we go straight for the buffet.

The food is bad, and there is too much of it. Now our booth is littered with dirty plates and glasses. Steve stares down a bowl of soft-serve ice cream melting out from under a pile of gummy bears.

"Now what?" I say.

"Games of chance."

"Luck be a lady."

For the next hour, Steve feeds about ten dollars in quarters into a Dukes of Hazzard slot machine. He gets bored, so I have him try blackjack. He loses \$50 in about three minutes. I give the cocktail waitress our coupons from the bus.

"The high roller wants a beer." I point at Steve.

"Anything in particular?" she says.

"Whatever. He won't know the difference. Rum and Coke for me."

Steve smells his beer three times without raising it to his lips.

"Something wrong?" I say.

"Not exactly what I imagined. Stinks kind of."

I give it a whiff. "That's beer, all right."

He drinks.

"Well?" I say.

"I'm waiting," he says.

"For what exactly?"

"You know. Hot chicks. Halftime at the Super Bowl. A dog on a skateboard."

"It's going to take more than one beer to get you *there*."

"This is not blowing my mind at all. How much beer would it take to get really drunk?"

"You'd probably have to puke again to make enough room."

"Maybe I should try something harder."

"Finish your first beer." I look at my watch. "We catch the bus at five."

As far as your mom knows, you're planting petunias at the temple."

"Can I enjoy this? Just shut up about home. There is no home."

"Right. Sorry."

"I can't get in trouble anyway. I could probably commit murder and my mom would think it was just wonderful. I'm immune."

Steve grimaces the rest of his beer down. I take him across the street to a strip club. The sign promises "Buxom Blondes." The lunch show is apparently over because the place is empty. Country music is playing on the radio. I poke my head inside the kitchen.

"Can we get a couple of beers out here?" I say.

"Sure," this big guy in an apron says.

We sit down in the front. The guy brings us two bottles.

"Any girls around?" I say. "My friend here came a long way to see a show."

"Sorry. But hang around, you know? There's always another show. Later this afternoon—"

"You don't mind?" I say. "We've got a couple of hours to kill."

"Knock yourselves out. You guys hungry?"

"No," Steve says. "We just did a buffet."

A few minutes later a girl comes in. She has the right implants and dye job for the sign outside. I go up to her.

"What?" she says. "I don't know you."

"You work here?" I say. She has on some kind of casino uniform.

"Maybe. Maybe I own the place."

"You dance?"

"Back off, jerk." She starts toward the kitchen.

"Wait. My friend is dying of cancer."

"Is that some kind of line?"

"I'll pay you fifty bucks to dance with him."

"No stripping?"

"He's over there." I point at him. "One dance. Hold him close."

"You've got to pay me first."

"Fine." I get out my wallet. "I'm serious about the cancer."

"Enough. You're grossing me out."

"It's not like it's contagious or anything."

She just glares. She holds out her hand, big fake fingernails and everything. I give her the cash, which she stuffs down her shirt. I bring her back to our table.

"Steve, this is—"

"Mandy," she says.

"Hey, I'm *Stevie*!" Two beers and he is buzzed pretty good.

"Dance with me." She holds her hand out to Steve.

He turns her down.

She takes his hand and pulls him out of his chair. She gathers his frail frame into her bosom. Steve seems really uncomfortable. She says something in his ear. He relaxes a little. Soon he leans into her. He kind of puts his bald head on her shoulder. She gives him a kiss on the cheek when the song is over. He says something in her ear. She smiles and says something back.

"More beer," he says, sitting back down. "This world sucks."

"You know what time it is?" I say.

"I don't want to go. I don't—"

"We can catch a later bus. We can go home tomorrow."

"It's all right. My family. They—I just don't want to make them worry."

"What did she say to you?"

"Her name," he says. "Her real name."

"What is it?"

"No. I promised."

We catch the five o'clock bus. It is mostly quiet. There is no bingo or anything. No vomiting. Steve is sound asleep. The sun is bright in the west, and we are heading straight east. I drive Steve home from where the bus drops us off. He smells strong of smoke and beer. I am thinking about his family.

"Steve, you ready to face your family tonight?"

"I'm immune. Remember?"

"You can blame anything on me."

"Give me some credit."

I drop him off. I go to the Village Inn and wash until closing.

The next day both of us are at the temple, working like usual.

\* \* \*

Steve doesn't show up to work on Monday, ten days later. I go up to his house, and they tell me he has a routine checkup in Salt Lake. He doesn't show up the next day either. His family says he is on bed rest. I ask to see him.

Steve is lying there reading. He is so gray and weak.

"Is that the same book?" I say.

"Yeah. No rush."

I laugh.

"Actually, they revoked my warrant yesterday."

Silence.

"No more *one month* or *one week* or anything," he says.

I don't know what to say to that.

"Guess what," he says. "My parents want me to go through the Salt Lake Temple with them."

"Really?" I see the bulls in my head. "Like baptisms for the dead?"

"I will probably go if I get the strength. I told them that I would rather it be Bountiful. Once it opens up—"

"That's not for another month at least."

"Right. Maybe my brother or somebody could play me."

"Huh."

"I said I will be there if I can, you know?"

"Steve, are you worried?"

"About what?"

"Hell and stuff. Judgment day."

"I'll be fine."

"What about Wendover?"

"No worries. Repentance, dude."

"Yeah."

"Besides, it was nothing like what I expected anyway."

All of the landscaping is finished now, and Steve is gone. The day I found out, I went home and asked Angie to marry me.

They let me volunteer in the open house but not inside the temple. I'm in the underground parking garage, putting little booties on

people's feet. I don't clean their shoes off or anything. But it's like I put something clean between them and the temple. And that is important. I try to explain this to the high school kid there with me.

"Whatever," he says.

"Did you see all the trees and bushes around the temple?"

"Yeah."

"They are special. I helped plant them."

"You are pretty special too, aren't you?"

A guy sits down, and I go to put the booties over his shoes. He puts a hand on my shoulder. I look him in the face. It is Steve's brother.

"Thank you," he says. "I guess I'm not surprised to see you here."

"I'm sorry about Steve."

"Yeah, I really miss him."

"He was a good guy."

"This is Steve's place now," he says. "I think of him working here. Sometimes I drive by half-expecting to catch a glimpse of him weeding a flower bed."

I don't know what else to say. He stands up. I put booties on his wife's little shoes.

"Sorry," he says. "Kind of creepy, right?"

I see the bulls in my mind. Their big blank eyes stare at me again.

"No," I say. "Don't be sorry. I think Steve is here in a way."

"Yeah."

"No, really. Steve told me he would try to be here. You know—if he could. He talked about you standing in for him or something."

I can see the tears welling up in his eyes. He purses his lips, smiles through the tears, gives me an appreciative nod, and turns away. He takes his wife by the hand. They make their way into the temple.

## Beginning to Bodysurf

B. W. JORGENSEN

Do not mistake water for wave:  
the form moves, purely, and is  
to water as spirit is to flesh;  
as anger or love will clench or curl  
a hand, the wave's potent abstraction  
wrests water to inflect its steady  
sentence against the deaf shore.

Approaching it, you know what rises  
to meet you is not "a wave" but the nearest  
crest of possible thousands across  
longitudes of untrammelled ocean—  
all one wave fetched by wind  
urging water as before God's  
first vowel, his insurgent breath.

But none of this will help you much.  
As a novice at love or prayer, bend  
to your work, hoping to learn what mind  
unbodied cannot conceive. Unready  
for the next green breaking swell,  
if you should dive, what you feel  
is not water stressing but the wave  
passing through and phrasing you;  
lacking long bones you'd writhe like an eel.



But if with a lucky kick you catch  
and ride that form reaching its term  
as number going wild in matter,  
where some have walked on water you  
may almost handstand. Or if you cartwheel  
in the hollow curl, quickly take  
the grace of the sudden zero, roll  
like a driftlog till you strand ashore.

In the last, best case, your will  
perfectly yielded, mated to the wave,  
you may skim its steepening face, glide,  
one arm for prow, the other for keel,  
till you run aground on the scrawled sand,  
the wave dispersing in froth sheathing  
you wholly in its bursting myriad instant  
swarm of white sparks as if  
each cell of your skin broke open  
sounding untranslatable words.

## Contributors

SHAWN P. BAILEY lives in Logan, Utah, with his wife, Andrea. They have two kids. He is an attorney. He blogs at A Motley Vision ([www.motleyvision.org](http://www.motleyvision.org)), and his stories and poems have appeared in *Irreantum*, *Dialogue*, *BYU Studies*, and *Popcorn Popping*. Go to [www.shawnbailey.com](http://www.shawnbailey.com) to read more of his stuff, including *All the Great Lights*, a bittersweet collection of missionary-memoir short stories.

RUSS BECK is working on a nonfiction MFA at Goucher College, where he anticipates writing about his LDS mission. He lives with his wife near Lexington, Kentucky, and teaches at the University of Kentucky.

TODD CHAPMAN was born and raised in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He served a Spanish-speaking mission in Portland, Oregon, and now studies English, with a creative writing emphasis, at Brigham Young University. He is a member of the Air Force ROTC and hopes to serve as a chaplain in the Air Force.

CASSIE EDDINGTON recently graduated from Utah Valley University. She hails from no specific city in Utah, rather claims the state as a whole, and is now applying to graduate programs outside (mainly) of Utah. "Grandma Was Never a Big Woman" originally appeared in *Touchstones*.

JOSHUA FOSTER grew up in southeastern Idaho where his family ran a potato and grain farm along with a cattle operation. From a young age, he participated in farming life, from shop work to tractor driving.

He earned master of fine arts degrees from the University of Arizona in fiction and nonfiction writing.

CARA GIACONOFF's story collection, *Unmarriageable Daughters*, is forthcoming from Lewis-Clark Press. Her stories have appeared in *Indiana Review*, *Other Voices*, *South Dakota Review*, and *descant*. She has completed a novel, *I'll Be a Stranger to You*, which won a first-place prize in 2007's Utah Original Writing Competition. Currently she is writing her second novel and teaching at Whitman College in Washington.

ANGELA HALLSTROM lives in South Jordan, Utah, with her husband and four children. Her fiction has received awards from the Utah Arts Council and has appeared or is forthcoming in *Dialogue*, *New Era*, *Irreantum*, and *Salt Flats Annual*. She holds an MFA in creative writing from Hamline University and has served on the editorial boards of *Water-Stone Review* and *Segullah*. She serves as co-editor of *Irreantum* and teaches creative writing at Brigham Young University. "Faithful" comes from her novel, *Bound on Earth*, which is now available.

DONNELL HUNTER received an MFA from University of Montana and taught at Ricks College (retired, 1993), Church College of Hawaii, and Brigham Young University (where he currently teaches part-time). He has published 350 poems in 135 journals. Since retiring, he has served the Church as President of the Mexico Veracruz Mission, Area Welfare Agent in Central America, and President of the Santiago Chile Temple. "The Story of Wolf" and "Children of Owl" are reprinted from *Children of Owl* (Honeybrook Press, 1985).

JOYCE JORDAN was born in 1951 in Montgomery, Alabama, the tenth of twelve children, and is the mother of four children; she has two grandchildren. Graduating from Utah Valley University in spring 2009, she will hold a bachelor's degree from the School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, majoring in English and literature, with a

creative writing emphasis. She presented, by invitation, a personal essay at the 1999 BYU Women's Conference in Provo, Utah.

BRUCE JORGENSEN received MA and PhD degrees from Cornell and has taught writing and literature at BYU since 1975. "Beginning to Bodysurf" originally appeared in *Kula Manu* (the literary magazine at BYU-Hawaii) in 1981 and has been reprinted in *"Proving Contraries": A Collection of Writings in Honor of Eugene England* (Salt Lake City: Signature, 2005). "Reading about Sex in Mormon Fiction—If We Can Read" was presented at the AML Annual Conference, UVSC, Orem, Utah, 7 April 2007; this essay branched off from an earlier one, "When We Read about Sex—If We Can Read," given at the First Annual Conference of Mormon Scholars in the Humanities, BYU, Provo, Utah, 23 March 2007.

VANESSA ARDEN NUCKOLLS loves the English language because it's crazy and makes no sense—two characteristics she strives to adopt daily. She lives for fresh air, family, good music, Shells and Cheese (the Velveeta brand), her studly husband, butterflies, sleep, rainy days, office supplies, and hoodies.

HEIDI TIGHE lives in Pocatello with her two sons and her husband, Brandon, who was also her high-school sweetheart (she is inordinately proud of this fact). She teaches literature and rhetoric at Idaho State University, occasionally putting down her students' papers to take a stab at writing something worth reading. In her spare time she pursues her third interest, frugal living and personal finance education, which she picked up because she realized quickly that being a stay-at-home mom and a part-time English instructor was not going to make her rich. In her spare spare time she watches the occasional online TV show (she's too cheap to have cable) and tries to learn to cook food that she would actually want to eat. After six years of trying, she's embarrassed to say that the prospects in this area are still grim.

### *Contributors*

NICOLE VOGL loves her four beautiful children, writing, and her ever-growing collection of really expensive shoes.

OLIVER WELCH is from Lindon, Utah, and resides in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he is in his final year at the University of Michigan Law School. He was fortunate enough to marry above himself and recently welcomed his first child.

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# IRREANTUM

## FICTION CONTEST 2010

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The Association for Mormon Letters and *Irreantum* are currently accepting manuscripts for their ninth annual fiction contest.

Because *Irreantum* is a literary journal dedicated to exploring Mormon culture, all contest entries must relate to the Mormon experience in some way. Authors need not be LDS. Any fictional form up to 8,500 words will be considered, including short stories and novel excerpts. Authors may submit one or two entries. *Irreantum* staff and members of the AML board are ineligible.

The first-place author will be awarded \$250, second-place \$175, and third-place \$100 (unless judges determine that no entries are of sufficient quality to merit awards). Publication in *Irreantum* is not guaranteed, but winners agree to give *Irreantum* first-publication rights.

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### SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS

Deadline: Saturday, May 30, 2010

Only electronic submissions will be accepted. Email your entry as an MS Word, WordPerfect, or RTF file attachment to [contest@mormonletters.org](mailto:contest@mormonletters.org).

In the subject line, please write "2010 Irreantum Fiction Contest." Include your name, the title of your submission, and your contact information, including address and phone number, in the body of the email.

To facilitate blind judging, no identifying information should appear in the story itself other than the title of the manuscript, which should appear as a header on each page.

Winners' names will be posted on *Irreantum's* website, [www.mormonletters.org/irreantum](http://www.mormonletters.org/irreantum), on Monday, August 31, 2010.

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For more information about *Irreantum* and the Association for Mormon Letters, see [www.mormonletters.org/irreantum](http://www.mormonletters.org/irreantum).

With no official connection to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Irreantum* and the Irreantum Fiction Contest are funded through a grant from the Utah Arts Council.

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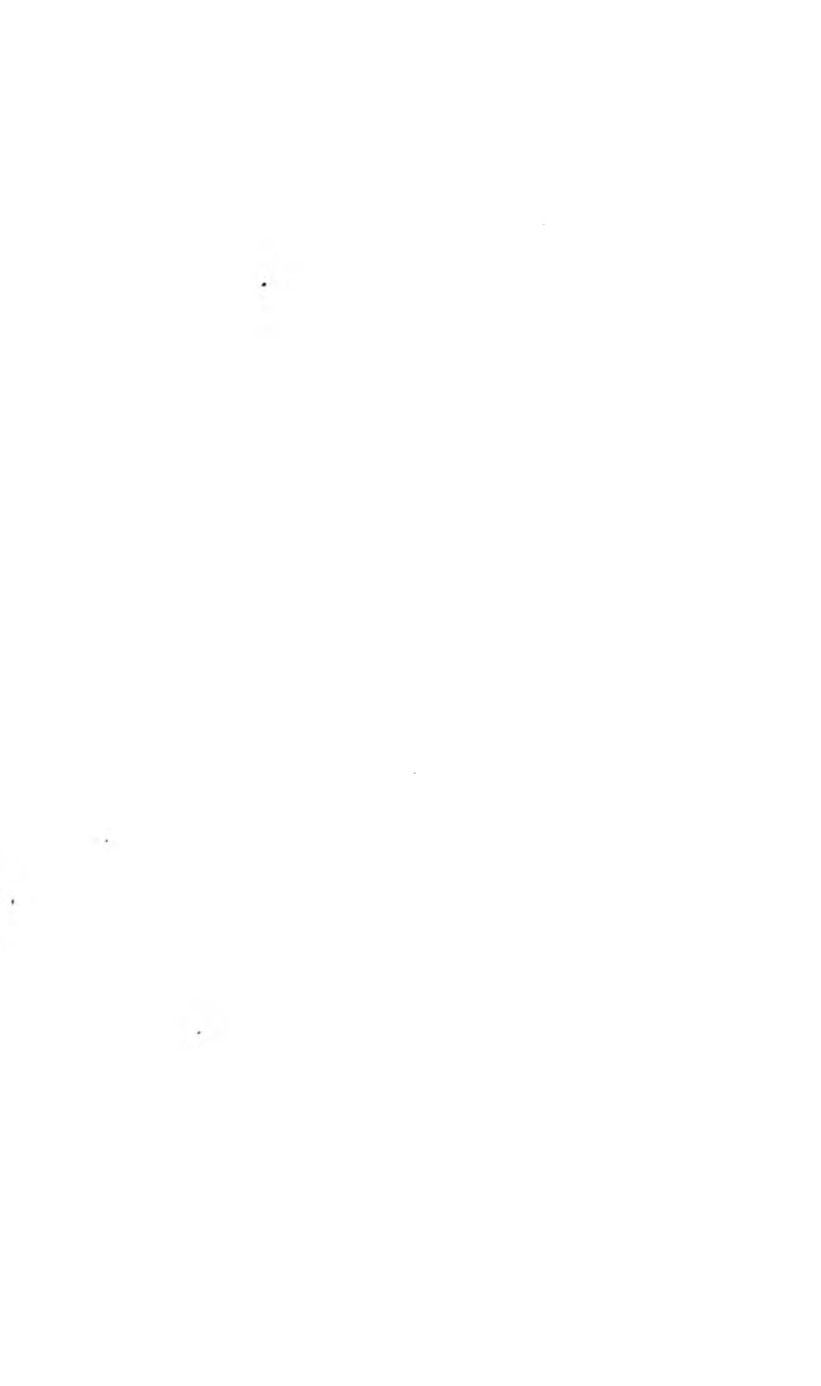
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# IRREANTUM

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It is not so much that art is dangerous—though I am willing to say it is—as that we, agents, are always free and thus always at risk. But also always responsible. There is no all-expenses-paid “moral holiday” in the experience of art, though any of us might wish, and act, as if there were.

—B.W. Jorgensen, “Reading about Sex in Mormon Literature—  
If We Can Read”

On that cold, gray day, the empty maple trees seemed to loom up out of the ground like skeletal hands, carpals and metacarpals, bony knuckles, blackened fingernails. Wet snow coated the ancient headstones, and trails from cars to the gravesite wormed through the slush.

—Joshua Foster, “Long in the Tooth”

“Tell me this isn’t wild,” I say. “Illegal bingo! On a bus!”

—Shawn P. Bailey, “Outside”



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